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Fandom's Forum

#1

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CONTRIBUTORS

Steve Adams
Kurt Busiek
Peter Gillis
Larry Houston
Richard Howell
Chuck Huber
Carol Kalish
Tom Linnehan
Scott McLeod
Rich Morrissey
Gene Phillips
Peter Sanderson
Hannah Shapero
Bob Soron
Carol Strickland
Don Thompson
Maggie Thompson
Murray Ward

STAFF

HAL SCHUSTER
publisher

RICHARD HOWELL
production manager

RICHARD HOWELL
CAROL KALISH
editors

CAROL KALISH
circulation manager

PETER GILLIS
PETER SANDERSON
PAUL DINI
assistant editors

BILL KRUTCHICK
financial officer

KATHIE MARET
BENNET POMERANTZ
traffic department

JACK SCHUSTER
president

PETER GILLIS
tells a story about
"SOME GOOD REASONS TO EVENTUALLY BURN YOUR COMIC COLLECTION."
p. 56

KURT BUSIEK claims
"WHEN TITANS CLASH —THEY REALLY DO!"
p.7

RICHARD HOWELL examines
"THE SCHOOL OF COMICS OVER-WRITING."
p. 11

JAMES VAN HISE
reports on
"SOME EXEMPLARY COMICS OF TODAY"
p. 29

CAROL KALISH asks
"WHY WOMEN DON'T READ COMICS."
p. 31

GENE PHILLIPS post-mortems
"THE ASSASSINATION OF FU MANCHU."
p.36

RICH MORRISSEY recounts
"COVERS, BACKUPS, AND MYSTERIES."
p. 41

DON AND MAGGIE THOMPSON demand
"YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LOVE."
p.53

CAROL STRICKLAND reports
"THE RAPE OF MS. MARVEL."
p. 61

BOB SORON
sets his sights on
"STORY AND ART IN COMICS—
p.67

KURT BUSIEK on
"Captain Universe" in
"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"
p.71

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PETER SANDERSON's
"LOC NESS"
column on the
FUTURE NEW X-MEN.
p.48

MURRAY WARD's
"FOUR-COLOR WORDS."
column on
"THE WONDER WOMAN WHO WASN'T."
p. 18

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LINES OF COMMUNICATION

by Carol Kalish

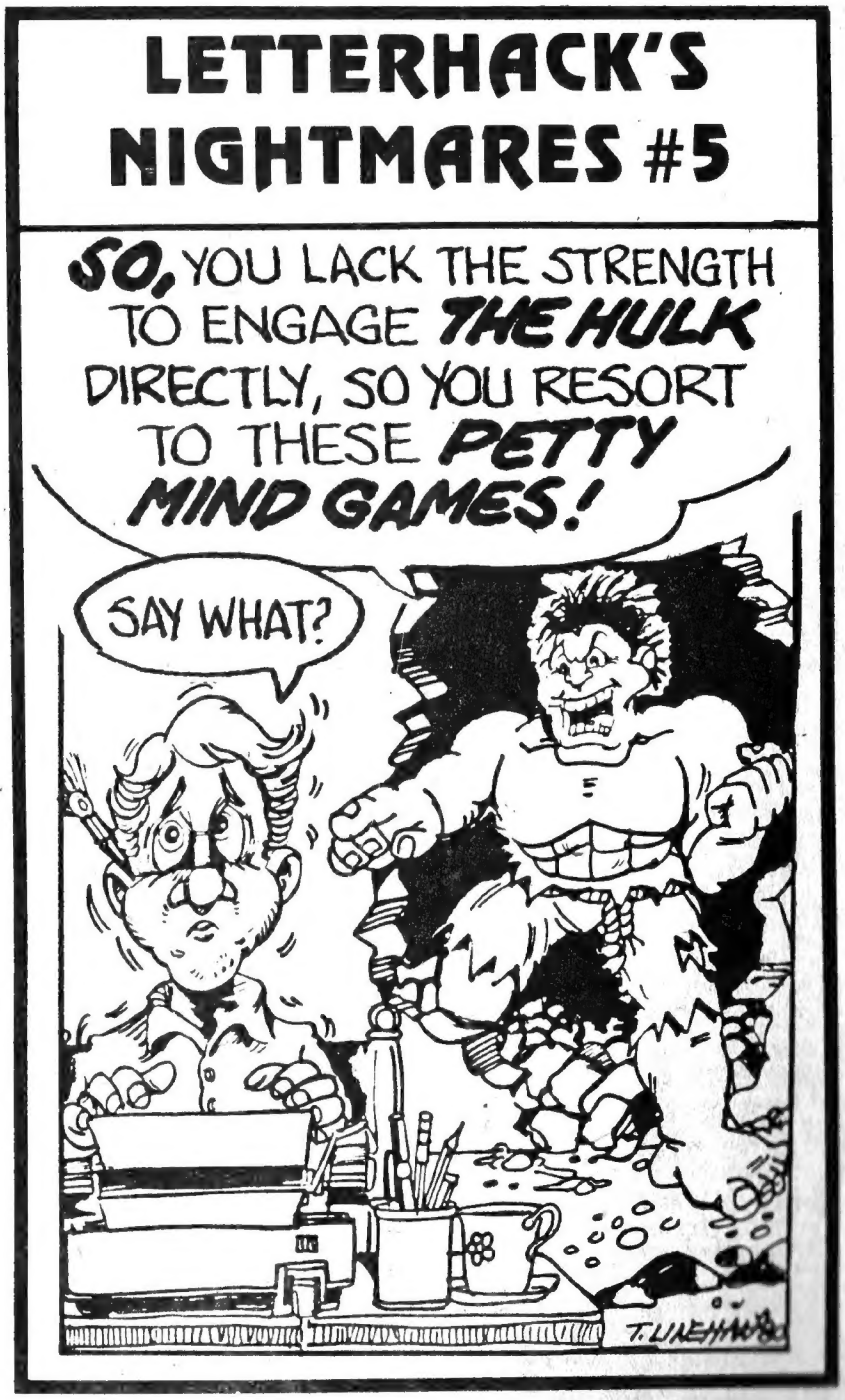
Welcome to the first issue of **LOC**. Like any first issue, this is something of an experiment in publishing; and, we hope, you will agree with us that it is an experiment that succeeds. For any benighted souls out there who do not know, our title stands for **L**etter **o**f **C**omment, the time-honored method of comics fandom for criticizing, analyzing, and responding to published work. Believe it or not, **LOC** is nothing more or less than a compendium of stimulating [we hope] articles and opinion essays. The provocation and sustenance of lively letters of comment constitutes our sole editorial stance.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Guess again. Each issue we have to locate twelve to fifteen well-written, intelligent, informative, and interesting letters/articles. While everyone seems to have worthwhile and stimulating things to **say**, very few fans seem to actually take the time to **write** about their ideas. We feel, however, that this dearth of letter-writing might be caused more by the lack of publication space than any reluctance among fans to commit their ideas to paper. We hope that **LOC** will provide many would-be writers and commentators with a suitable avenue through which to express their ideas.

In the early days of fandom, the primary purpose of fanzines was to facilitate communication among the disparate members of fandom. Nowadays, fanzines seem far more interested in covering the news than in providing an outlet for letters, opinions, and timely criticism of the comics medium. **LOC** is designed to fill the void and resuscitate the earlier approach of the original fanzines.

This issue we think is a solid example of what we hope **LOC** can achieve. Twelve noted commentators of the comics medium have chosen topics near [and dear] to their hearts as the subjects of their essays. Some writers like Don and Maggie Thompson have chosen to pursue a more historical bent, while others like Peter Sanderson and Kurt Busiek have chosen to offer their personalized reviews of several of the current comic releases. Each writer, though, has tackled his subject in his own individual style. Some approaches are controversial, some are scholarly, but all are penetrating and informative studies of the medium.

So, you see, **LOC** is an experiment. It raises the question of whether or not the old approach to comics commentary, which allows fans themselves to determine what topics are interesting to **them** and then offers them the opportunity to comment on those very same topics, is still viable. Like any experimenter we hope that our experiment is successful. **LOC** can succeed only if its readers agree that communicating their thoughts and opinions to other comics enthusiasts is important and something they want to do. **LOC** can succeed only if its readers contribute thought-provoking essays of their own or respond to the articles already published. **LOC** can succeed only if fandom itself re-discovers the joy of written debate. **LOC** can succeed only if **you** want it to. ●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WHEN TITANS CLASH —

THEY REALLY DO!

by Kurt Busiek

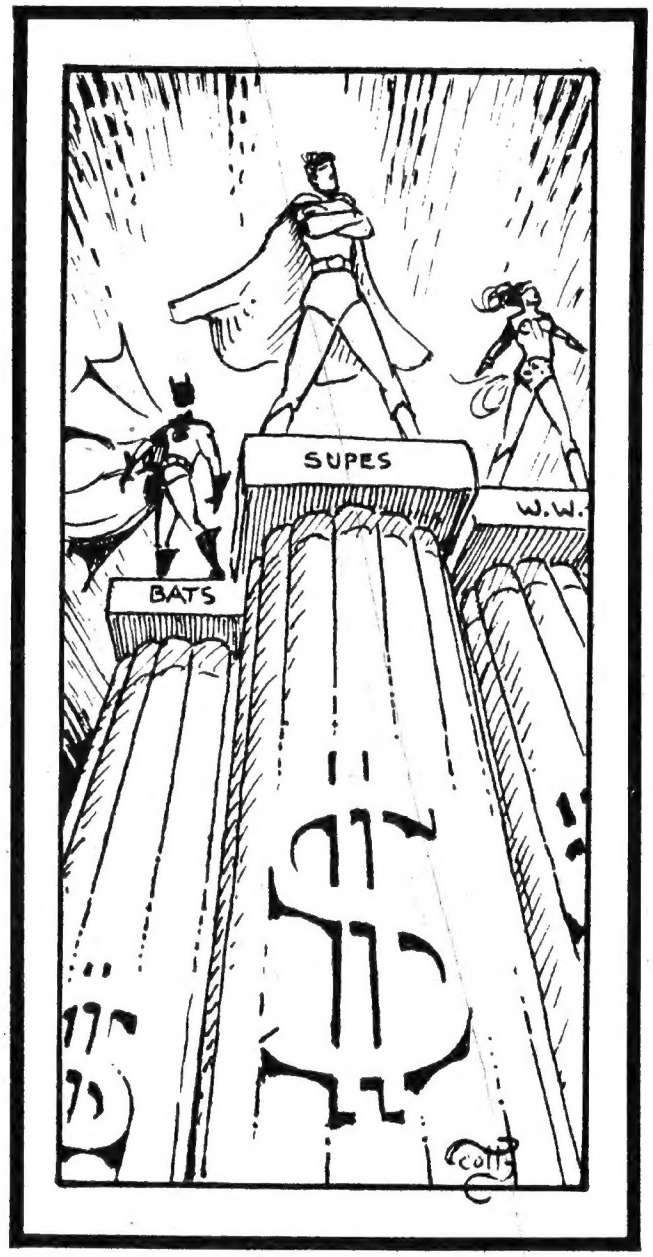
Up until recently, there were two major types of super-hero teams in comics. A third has joined them nowadays, and though this type of team has not been incredibly successful, comics creators treat it as just as viable a concept as the other two. I think this brand of team, and the ideas that foster it, bear investigating, as a close look shows it to be based on principles that almost guarantee its failure. For those of you irritated with my failure to name names this early in the article, I'm about to come down heavy on the **NEW TEEN TITANS**.

The two types of team I first referred to are typified by the Justice League of America and the Fantastic Four. I'll examine each in turn, and hopefully define the bases of their success, so when we get to the Titans, my arguments will be based on a logical structure (which is usually a good thing.).

The Justice League, as well as The Avengers and The Justice Society, is not so much a team as a collection. There is usually a great number of characters who may or may not work well as a team—it doesn't matter if they do. The main strength of the book is that the reader can see several of his favorite heroes together—all the "best" characters at once. The characters are the tried-and-true sales giants.

Kurt Busiek is a Creative Writing major at Syracuse University.

like Superman, Batman, Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Wonder Woman—plus minor-leaguers [who nevertheless are capable of supporting their own books] like Ant-Man, Green Lantern, the Flash, etc. Wonder Man and Zatanna never had their own books, it's true, but by the time of their induction into their respective teams, the team was going strong in sales, and had built a **reputation** on the other characters that allowed it to branch out and add relative unknowns. And this approach works. Given that a certain amount of people will buy a comic book on the strength that it has Superman in it, and that another group will buy a book on the strength of Batman, even allowing for a sizeable overlap, you've still got a very healthy market to offer your magazine to



[witness the success of **WORLD'S FINEST**, which does just that]. Adding in Green Lantern and the Flash only makes the product that much more appetizing. So... though irate Batman fans may demand Superman's expulsion from the JLA because Batman is pretty useless when Superman is around [as is most of the team, from an action standpoint], Superman will never leave the team because most of those Batman fans will buy the book anyway [and probably **WORLD'S FINEST** as well]. Teamwork is simply not that important. If you'll remember, the JSA, the All-Winners Squad, and the early **JLA**s tended to split the heroes up anyway, so the only place teamwork would be needed was on the cover. But what about The Avengers? They didn't always have high sales-potential characters to spearhead the popularity of the magazine, I hear some of you shout. Certainly no one can accuse Hawkeye, the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver of being Marvel's vanguard, and Captain America was not incredibly popular when he and they constituted The Avengers—certainly not popular enough to carry an entire team on his shoulders. Ah, but at that time, The Avengers were the **other** sort of team, which conveniently brings me to my discussion of them.

The Fantastic Four, The Metal Men, The Doom Patrol, the original X-Men... there are more examples of this kind of team, mostly because there can really be only one sales-oriented team at each company—there aren't that many sales blockbusters to go around. This other team I refer to as a team of balance—where it is the team itself that provides the attraction, more than the characters which make up the team. Teamwork becomes important here, as does character definition and character interplay. Who cares if Superman and Batman aren't very different from costumed automatons in the Justice League? They're still Superman and Batman, and they'll still sell [witness the almost characterless Fox **JLA**s]. But what would The Fantastic Four be without the Thing's animosity toward Mr. Fantastic? Or the Torch and the Thing's verbal and physical sparring? The characters must interact, because **they alone** are **not enough**—the **team** is the important thing, and it must have an identity of its own. Many people thought [and still think] that the Angel was nearly useless to the X-Men. But the team would not have been the same without him. His brash, egotistical rich-boy personality played off Cyclops' quiet, unsure one, causing a rivalry over Marvel Girl that allowed for far more character exposition than otherwise. Left to her own devices, Jean would have gravitated toward Scott, everyone would have been happy, and we wouldn't really know much about them. But given the situation that existed, Scott got to show us how he felt he should stay away from people because of his deadly peepers, his self-sacrificing nature by valuing the team over his own feelings, and his ultimate humanity by expressing his love for Jean anyway. Jean got to show her uncertainty, and her good taste by preferring noble Scotty to the rich, handsome Warren Worthington. If the Angel were someone else, it would practically have had to be another brash, egotistical rich-boy type—so everyone came back issue after issue to see what happened to the characters, as well as to see the bad guys lose [or win]. The powers, as well, in The FF, the X-Men and The Doom Patrol were simple enough such that they didn't require much explanation, and you could have most or all of the team in action simultaneously [The Metal Men all had the same powers, so that wasn't too difficult]. In short, you didn't need to know

much about the team to read your first issue, and that issue held plenty to bring you back next time.

All of this groundwork brings me to The New Teen Titans. They aren't the first to fall into this new mold, there were The Champions and two other sets of Teen Titans [seen in the later issues of both the Titans' first series and their second]. These teams are characterized by a large number of characters that don't neccesarily work together, in powers or personality, yet do **not** have the high sales potential characters that will support the book regardless of the level of interaction. It sounds, by this description, like these teams should not succeed financially. Is this the case?

Well, examining the reasons we've stated for teams succeeding, they don't have a chance under reason **#1**. In fact, it works against them. When sitting on the newsstand, this comic has nobody on the cover to make the average fan go "Oboy, look: it's Iceman!!" [for example], and plunk down his allowance for the latest **CHAMPIONS**. Even if he is a die-hard Iceman fan, he will probably not be attracted to the book because there simply isn't enough Iceman in the issue. He's crowded out by Hercules, the Black Widow, Ghost Rider, and Black Goliath. Iceman not being Batman, six panels an issue will not be enough to satisfy. The plethora of characters the potential reader has never heard of will drive him away. There isn't even a Green Lantern here—it's lucky if even one character has his own book.

Reason **#2** doesn't help matters much, in fact it makes matters worse. Where Iceman was an integral character in **THE X-MEN**, he cannot interact as well with a demon and a god as he could with other kids of varying backgrounds. And his power, though simple, has a hard time meshing with the extremely different fighting styles of the rest of the team. He does not contribute to a "team" image for the book, nor does he stand on his own as an interesting character. Similarly, with the New Titans, Cyborg's mad-on at the entire world and Kid Flash's curious mental enslavement to Raven have nothing to do with each other, and serve to bury Robin under a pile of unfamiliar super-beings, Robin being the only one that has any sales potential on a level with the **JLA** characters.

As a matter of fact, the New Teen Titans is the only example of this team [aside from the Legion of Super-heroes, which I'll get into later] that is currently on the stands. **THE CHAMPIONS** were cancelled, and the other Teen Titans have been cancelled twice. Now the original **X-MEN** was cancelled, **THE DOOM PATROL** was cancelled, and **THE METAL MEN** have bought it twice. In each case, however, there is fan outcry for their reinstatement. The original X-Men still have a sizeable following, even with a new team around, and the Doom Patrol has been dead for ten years—yet there was enough clamor for a new team to be created [although it did not, apparently, go over]. Does anybody mourn for The Champions? There doesn't seem to be much call to get the old gang back in their Champscraft [and on motorcycle] and get them defending the common man again. The Teen Titans are another story, though. There is always fan sentiment supporting the team, even though they keep getting axed. However, if you look at the original Teen Titans, and even the first few issues of the Titans' second run, you'll find that this team is actually a team of balance! Robin, Kid Flash, Speedy, and Wonder Girl are a small, balanced team with easily explained powers and diverse personalities [yet not so diverse as to make one wonder what they're doing in the same universe]. The team could be grasped readily as a concrete unity, even when Aqualad joined. But when Gnarrk, Lilith, Beast Boy and others are added in, the original team gets swamped, and the simplicity is lost. There are just too many characters the idle reader doesn't care about—and too little space to make him care about them. Of course the book is cancelled. And when it is reinstated, they start out with a simple balanced team once more—but before long not only are Beast Boy, Hawk, Dove, and the entire old guard back, but Harlequin, Hornblower and Bumblebee are around to confuse the fans. There are so many characters, in fact, that there are two separate teams of Titans. Of course, the book is cancelled again.

Now, The Titans are back, in name at least. Robin is leading the team as always, and Wonder Girl and Kid Flash are around to make it reminiscent of the old original team. Beast Boy, er, Changeling is here from the median groups—and then there are the new guys: There's an alien, a cyborg, and a sorceress. It

doesn't quite sound like the new members are going to slide easily into a team framework. And they don't. In three issues and a preview, Cyborg has interacted with everyone on the same level—his character is played out through space-consuming encounters with his father. Raven is a mystery [which means that the writer **refuses** to tell us anything about the character] who, apart from not interacting, doesn't even appear with the team much [Kid Flash makes it abundantly clear that he'd like to interact with Raven—but any corroborating reasons for this remain mysteries too]. Again, the character is defined through space-consuming arguments with a thingy-in-the-sky off on some cliff somewhere. And Starfire, now that she's learned English [through attempted rape], is busy expounding her character to whoever will listen—but nobody will really take the time to interact with her [except Changeling, who wants to be raped]. Kid Flash is doing nothing but panting inexplicably over Raven, and Wonder Girl and Robin have done nothing, leaving the Changeling [who's been ribbing everyone, making jokes out of whatever straight lines he gets, and pulling character exposition whenever he gets the chance] as the only character for whom any trouble has been gone to to define or to get him acting in character—and he **can't carry** the **book!** The three sales-oriented characters, for whatever they're worth, are the three that the least amount of time is spent on, thus jettisoning whatever appeal the teen counterparts of Batman, Wonder Woman and the Flash might have to the fans. There's nothing there to make anybody care about the characters singly or the team as a whole, even if entire buildings pop out of nowhere and slugs travel back in time to advertise. Where is the appeal?

It's over in the thirtieth century, with the **LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES**. They are a team that has no strong sales characters [now that they've booted Superboy] and so many divergent members that the team is seldom the same from issue to issue. Yet they flourish. How? Well, they not only had help, but they make the concepts which bog down a team like The Titans work, merely by emphasizing them. Individual characters are almost unnoticeable when you view the Legion over any sizeable period of time—there are just too many of 'em. This, however, simply **forces** the reader to think of the book as **"THE LEGION,"** identify it as a team, and buy it for the team, rather than for the characters. This idea would take a long time to catch on with the public, though—and sure enough it did. The Legion was supported by Superboy [and if anybody can support an entire team singlehandedly, it's Clark] for years and years, and may still fail without him. But if they are a solid success, The Titans still cannot emulate them, this time because they've got too **few** characters. Individual characters are important to The Titans, and they're stuck in a situation where the creators are unable [or unwilling] to exploit the characterization they need.

All right, all right, I hear you out there. Where do the New X-Men fit into this? They're probably the

number one super-team with fandom-in-general, and interestingly enough, The Titans bear more than a passing resemblance to them. Why are they so successful?

Well, the **NEW X-MEN** has managed to get a little of both worlds, and exploited the sales angle well in the beginning, and are now in the process of settling

down into a team of balance [albeit unwillingly]. The name **"X-Men"** has been in comics since 1963, and had a lot of respect in the fan world at the time of **GIANT-SIZED X-MEN #1**. The reprint title [which had kept the logo in the public eye] had kept a ready market of casual readers for a book with that title. So the book didn't have to break into the market; it had a foothold already. Plus, the early appearances of the Juggernaut, the Sentinels, and Magneto [the original X-Men's biggest villains] helped establish the new bunch as a **team** in the public's eyes. These villains' quarrels were with The X-Men, not with Storm, or Banshee, but with the team as a whole. And during the period the book was depending on its logo and history, the creators were driving the personalities and powers of the newcomers into the audience's mind, building a public for the new team, out of the ashes of the old, as it were.

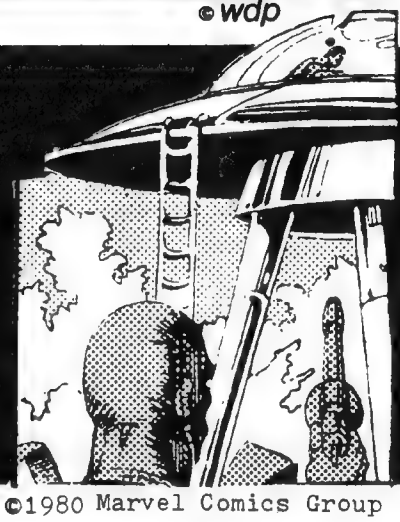
Still...for all their sales assists, the New X-Men has dropped in membership from seven to six, replacing two of its most complicated members with simple ones. Phoenix's powers had grown ponderous by her demise, and Banshee was odd from the beginning. Their powers were difficult to show and explain in a small amount of space. The Angel's powers are clearly visible—with wings, one would expect him to fly, and he does just that. No further explanation is necessary. I have yet to find a Marvel staffer who can give a coherent explanation of Sprite's powers, which makes things simple: Since they can't be explained, why bother? Cyclops, too, is gone, which leaves fewer characters to work with, and those characters are interacting all over the place—in the Danger Room, in Canada, anywhere they can, the New X-Men bare their somewhat bizarre souls to the reader and each other.

The Titans however, are emulating The New X-Men with such elements as scaly aliens chasing a humanoid mystery woman across a galaxy, and having a character's hair turn into fire when she flies. Not exactly the sort of thing that will tap into **THE NEW X-MEN**'s core attraction... And they seem to be extremely anxious to deny the old **TITANS** series, and not tie into them at all. True, there aren't too many villains for them to bring back [Mad Mod? Big Daddy Ding-Dong? Mr. Twister?] aside from Dr. Light, the logo is new, and the "teen" aspect is deemphasized [the sidekick image, which is what the book was sold on when it was popular, is being thrown out]. Most of that, I would say, is necessary, but it'll make it harder for the book to catch on, and Wein, Wolfman and Perez don't seem to be doing much to offset their disadvantages.

Throughout this article, I've been discussing only sales popularity, but I think all this applies to the artistic success of a team as well. If a book doesn't sell because it doesn't make us care about the characters, then it's failed artistically, too. There are reasons for anything's success, and the least any responsible professional can do is at least try to be aware of them. In creating a super-hero team, there are two major ways to make it successful, and rejecting both of them without substituting something that makes an adequate replacement [as did **THE LEGION**] is downright foolish. Creating a super-hero team is not simply piling up characters, any more than creating a super-hero is simply piling up powers. If Wein and Wolfman had realized this, maybe we wouldn't be saddled with **THE NEW TEEN TITANS**. When **THE TITANS** fail, maybe someone **will** realize this, and we won't have to suffer through anything like them anymore. ●

peter pan

H.G. WELLS



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THE SCHOOL OF COMICS OVER-WRITING

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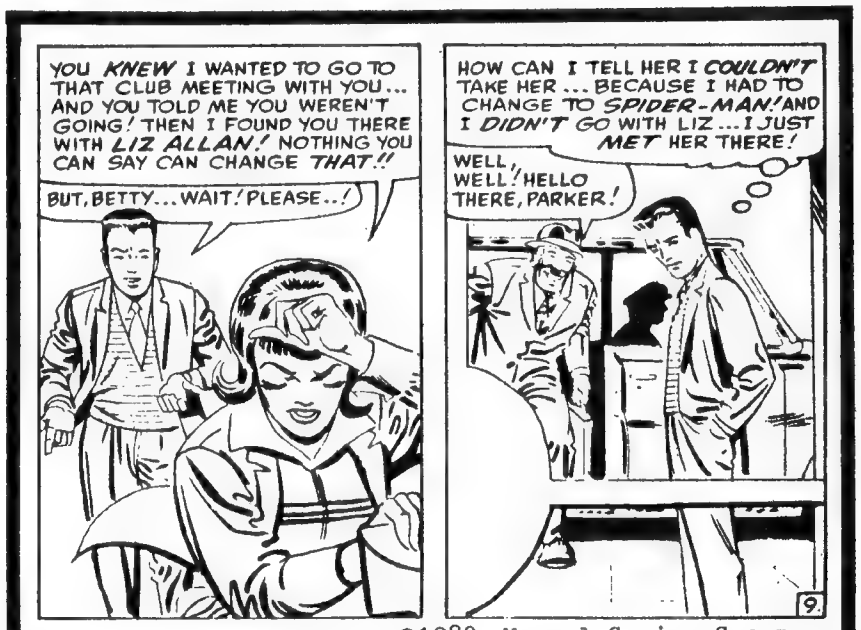
by Richard Howell

I don't suppose that anyone beyond my circle of friends and fellow critics has had any call to notice my particular delights and bugaboos about comics art. I know that there are comics critics and journalists out there whose likes and dislikes are all **too** clear. They are usually clear enough that one can ascertain the verdict of their reviews merely by applying to the review's subject the prejudices already associated with the critic's name. Certain devotees of Starlin or Claremont come to mind as examples of this syndrome.

I would imagine, though, that I have thus far escaped such compartmentalization—partially through underexposure, and partially through an attempt at careful phrasing. There is the matter that for two years now I've been working on a book about Jack Kirby's art and career, but that's not generally known. I suspect, though, that with my present editorial position [and its attendant status as "house columnist"], the part of my opinions' anonymity that's due to underexposure is due to become a thing of the past. [I do plan to maintain as careful phrasing as I can manage, though.]

One of my personal pet peeves in present-day comics is what Russ Manning calls "the school of comics **over**writing." This approach is a logical development of the Lee/Kirby/Ditko comics of the early 1960's [which were themselves significantly derivative of the Simon & Kirby love comics of the 1940's, but that's another story] in which the characters evoked reader identification and empathy through their evocation of human foibles and "problems," and through their pseudo-naturalistic response to dramatic situations.

This is not to claim that the characters were fatally flawed as super-heroes, merely that they were more idyosincratically human. [Stan Lee misrepresented that aspect of the characters as their having "feet of clay." The early 1960's Marvel characters rarely evidenced anything less noble than a certain hot-temperedness or a winsome incapability to cope with their own romantic problems.] This opened up new vistas of exploration for the creative personnel: First, it meant that the new breed of "super-heroes with super problems" were expected to be increasingly more demonstrative in expressions of their unconventional personalities. Marvel comics were perceived to be darker and more exciting than the assumedly-more-conventional DC fare, and the "flawed hero" personality fillips kept that image thriving. Secondly, since so much of these new characters' motivations were comparitively more subtle than had been presented in comics before that time, new methods of personality depiction through dialogue and captions had to be pioneered. No more of the hero-who-was-a-hero-because-he-had-a-square-jaw [and


YOU KNEW I WANTED TO GO TO THAT CLUB MEETING WITH YOU... AND YOU TOLD ME YOU WEREN'T GOING! THEN I FOUND YOU THERE WITH LIZ ALLAN! NOTHING YOU CAN SAY CAN CHANGE THAT!!
BUT, BETTY... WAIT! PLEASE..!
HOW CAN I TELL HER I COULDN'T TAKE HER ... BECAUSE I HAD TO CHANGE TO SPIDER-MAN! AND I DIDN'T GO WITH LIZ ... I JUST MET HER THERE!
WELL, WELL! HELLO THERE, PARKER!
9.

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The early Marvel hero-with-problems: Peter Parker and Betty Brant.

shoulders]—the readers wanted to know why that certain hero could save New York twice a month, but couldn't get a date to save his life. That meant narrative transmission of information. Somebody [the character himself, some other character, or the narrator] had to inform the reader of that part of the character's psychological makeup that could **not** be adequately transmitted through the visuals. Dialogue and captions were saddled with double-duty; no long-

Richard Howell is a graduate of Harvard University, with a B.A. in English and Art, a graduate of John Buscema's art school, amd the writer/artist/creator of the alternative comic **PORTIA PRINZ OF THE GLAMAZONS.**

er were they utilized merely to move the plot along. Long sequences of character depiction abounded. Sometimes they **were** the plot.

These dual vistas have each been well-trod in the ensuing twenty years since their establishment as such. Working within the loose framework built by Lee, Kirby and Ditko, later writers such as Roy Thomas, Archie Goodwin, and [especially] Steve Englehart have expanded on the theme of super-heroes with increasingly more eccentric personalities. Heroes appeared who were snobs, emotionally repressed, chauvinists, overly authoritarian, immature, etc.—yet they each demonstrated ample heroism and noble selflessness of motive whenever a crisis threatened.

In the early 1970 s Marvel Comics took on a darker tone still, with the addition of the "monster-hero" books: **TOMB OF DRACULA, WEREWOLF BY NIGHT, THE GHOST RIDER, THE SON OF SA-**

AH, HOW TOUCHING--YOU REMEMBERED THE WORDS FROM YOUR FATHER'S JOURNAL.
I SHOULD HAVE SLAIN THE FOOL BEFORE HE EVER WROTE THEM.
:AHEM!: GOOD EVENING, QUINCY--HOW PLEASANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN.
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TAN, etc. The most successful of these was **TOMB OF DRACULA,** a gothic soap-opera **cum** horror-adventure comic series involving mortals' efforts to destroy the undead Count Dracula. Ultimately, Dracula was killed, but not before he had proven himself a Better Man than any of those who surrounded him —and had found God besides. The matter of the thousands of murders in which he revelled was soft-pedaled. The doorway was kicked open still further with **WEREWOLF BY NIGHT,** a series in which Jack Russell, a California teen-ager, inherited a family curse through which he, under the influence of the full moon, became a ravaging beast. Russell was so much a threat to the lives of those around him that the threat of the family curse hanging over the head of his conveniently-invented sister was necessitated to prevent his otherwise-advisable suicide.

Also, since the reader [or the Comics Code Authority] had to be constantly reminded of the reasons why they should feel any sympathy with these "monster-heroes," a system of captioned narrative evolved in which the characters' own words and actions were explained and interpreted by the narrator. Dracula's gleeful murders were thereby ultimately chalked up as the actions of a man "born in a harsher age." Jack Russell's body-count was [it was claimed] allowable in that he needed to stay alive to prevent the werewolf curse from striking his younger sister [equals unselfish motive, says the caption]. As the heroes moved further and further away from the traditional heroic ideal, these elaborate justifications proliferated.

Today, both of these strains in super-heroic comics have expanded to the point of taking over the industry. Inasmuch as Marvel Comics has enjoyed a reputation for producing more "sophisticated" fare [as opposed to DC, whose more traditional approach to both storytelling and heroics has labelled them "juvenile"], and the fan market has been getting increasingly demanding of more material which is at least outwardly slanted toward the older reader, nearly all comics published today feature heavy narrative and problem-ridden heroes.

This in and of itself is no great detriment. [It is possible that Manning's objection is founded in a normal artist's prejudice to have sufficient room to work, to shine.] The problem, as with all appropriations of previously-developed techniques, lies in the instances of misapplication. This can manifest itself in particularly pernicious ways:

First, there is the already-noted trend toward weirder and less-defensible-as-heroes super-heroes. Arguably, the "hero" characters in series whose stories **take place** "in a harsher age" can be grouped in this classification, although they have historical precedent for their actions on their side. [This would include the like of Conan and Jonah Hex.] This loophole might also excuse Dracula, although the ultimately sympathetic treatment of Dracula's present-day horrible actions might gainasy it. [There would seem to be little excuse for the Werewolf.] As the heroes whose actions skirt [or spit in the face of] comics heroes' traditional modes of heroic behavior become more numerous, it also became more evident to the less responsible creators that a sizeable group of the fans and readers didn't care about getting justifications for their non-heroes' behavior—they were enjoying it! Although a certain amount of responsibility is shown by the likes of Michael Fleischer [who at least goes to some trouble to show that the people who are slated to be killed by Jonah Hex or the Spectre were at least irreedeemably corrupt and a threat to innocents], not all present-day storytellers even go that far. The case of Claremont and Byrne's **NEW X-MEN**, in which a conscienceless murderer [Wolverine], a genocidal maniac [Phoenix], a hypocritical prig [Storm], and a shallow rotter [Cyclops], among others, are wholeheartedly embraced by fandom-at-large, is perhaps the most degrading

indictment of the trend towards "less traditional" heroic images—and of those who encourage[d] it. Again, this is a logical outgrowth of the then-experimental **FANTASTIC FOUR** comic, and entirely defensible as such. It is reasonable to asume that when certain comic heroes get too far removed from anything resembling heroics, the fans and readers will discontinue their support of those heroes. [As regards the **NEW X-MEN**, however, this reader at least wonders how much lower any alleged superhero can possibly sink. Perhaps former Marvel editor Rick Marschall targetted his audience exactly when he proudly described the story in which Star-Lord committed his first murder as the story in which that hero "loses his image as the sissy of the spaceways."]

The hero as mad killer: how much further can they sink?

Secondly, there is the trend toward overdoing the narrative caption overlay. It is argumentative just how much copy per panel is "too much." Don McGregor's work has been criticized for its volume of verbiage, yet any examination of the best-selling ECs or Simon & Kirby material from the 1950's will reveal that next to them, McGregor was practically Charlie Chaplin. Some **HEAVY METAL** contributors take comics storytelling to the opposite extreme with their solely visual stories. The rightness or wrongness of any amount of copy it would seem, would be best regulated by the subject matter, the creator's style, and the tolerance of the individual audience. If Russ Manning would prefer to work with a scripter who prefers to let the visuals do the lion's share of the storytelling [like Kanigher, Goodwin, or Manning himself], rather than one who feels that the writing should embellish every nuance [such as McGregor], it's more a question of Manning's taste than any objective "right" or "wrong" way to tell comics stories.

Again, the danger is in misapplication. When it occurs, it produces strange scenes in which the characters' motivations and natures as explained by the narrator are directly contradicted by the actions of the characters themselves. The aforementioned **NEW X-MEN** is a hotbed of such lapses, as the writer vainly tries to defend his characters' various repugnant actions. In part, this may account for that book's success among the "So-and-so is warm, compassionate, and loving—it says so right here" school of fans and critics.

How can these dangers be avoided? Is the alternative to fall back into cardboard characterizations of monosyllabic hero-images? Fortunately, it is not, and a recently-published story can be used as an example.

The first is Jim Shooter and John Buscema's **"A Very Personal Hell,"** in **THE HULK!** Magazine **#23**. The plot involves former physicist Bruce Banner's being forced into committing actions which he would otherwise abhor [such as attempting to steal books] in the course of his ever-continuing search for something to cure him of being the Hulk. Banner meets a woman executive, a pair of addicts, and a couple of marauding gays—all very wrapped up in themselves and in their own problems, and thus, all very vulnerable. The gays attempt to rape Banner in the YMCA shower, but he plays upon their prowler's fear of never knowing what resources their potential victims might have to defend themselves. The female addict needs the Hulk to protect her from her crazed lover, and the Hulk barely rescues her from a fire lit by that same wildly jealous "old man." The executive has been manipulated by her vain mother all her life, had a failed marriage, and is facing the spectre of having her only child legally taken away from her. All

"THE SCREEN SHREDDED BENEATH MY IMPACT! I HAD NEVER BEEN WHAT THEY CALL A MEDIA FREAK, THOUGH I HAD STUDIED THE PHENOMENON OF THOSE IMAGES OF LIFE-MIMICRY.
"I HURTLED THROUGH THE AIR INTO THE AUDIENCE. I WAS A NEW IMAGE BEFORE THEIR ASTONISHED EYES— PROBABLY SEEMING MORE FICTIONAL THAN THE COLOR FIGURES WHOSE EXISTENCES DEPENDED ON THE RECTANGULAR WORLD I HAD SHATTERED.
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A typical Don McGregor panel, "embellishing every nuance" and then some.

of these people "need" Bruce Banner [and/or the Hulk] in some way, but the self-imposed limits of any commitment **they** might bring to that interchange [and their own personal failings], dooms any of the relationships to disaster.

"A Very Personal Hell" relates to this article in its relative **under**playing of the unconventional characterizations it features. Rather than extensively psycho-analyzing the gays and the addicts, and explaining and opining on the social forces which formed them, writer Shooter merely presents their words and actions, and forces the reader to construct the analysis. This is also true of the parasitic mother-daughter-grandson relationship which forms the major part of the story. The flawed mother flaws her daughters so that she can control them. One acedes, and the other, although defiant, does not have the strength to maintain herself, and turns to pills and two suicide attempts. The main manifestations

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Banner's ill-fated love interest in **HULK! #23.**

of the characters' psyches are what is presented, not narrative overlays explaining them. For example, when the daughter bitterly complains about her mother's spoiling the grandson, the mother asks, "Is that what your psychiatrist told you, dear?" This indicates to the reader that the mother routinely turns her daughter's accusations right back at her, that she is a master at preserving the **facade** of polite family conversation ["dear," thus forcing the onus of turning it into an unwarranted argument onto her opponent], and that she is in the habit of questioning her daughter's mental health [the reference to the psychiatrist, plus the implication that the daughter cannot do her own thinking]. As regards the daughter's suicidal tendencies, her psychological imbalance, overdependence on her son, and growing reliance on pills are all clearly shown. The attentive reader can fill in the rest by himself. If anything, Shooter was being too blatant in having his vain mother character mention her daughter's previous suicide attempt.

As difficult as this understated approach is, however, [and as masterful an example as **"A Very Personal Hell"** is of that technique], it has its flaws—and the flaws are what most criticism of the story itself actually address. Shooter's downplaying of spoon-fed narrative interpretation places the burden of understanding on the reader's shoulders, where it is, by and large, an uneasy burden. Regardless of the supposedly "mature" audience for the Marvel magazines, it is doubtful how many comics fans know addiction, attempted rape, custody battles, extra-marital affairs, and psychological manipulation as anything but melodramatic cliches, usually badly mishandled in various irresponsible arms of the entertainment media. Shooter might have felt that he was putting enough credible detail into the story to reinforce its realism, but it is possible that he overestimated both the life experience of his readers and their tolerance for any comic story which did not continually prompt and reassure them as to the motivations and meaning of the actions of its characters. For those inexperienced-yet-cynical souls, accuracy is not enough. Whatever happens must be embellished in the story narrative itself before any credence can be given to it. It has been said before that subtlety is not renowned for its sales punch. To that adage of unmarketable vices for a present-day comics writer might be added: Unembellished, real-life experience.

Shooter's story, however, only addressed part of the question of suggested alternatives for the school of comics over-writing. As much as he demonstrated the subtle joys of a story actually **written** for a mature audience, he still featured rather unsavory non-heroic types throughout it. Is it possible to construct a commercial comic with realistic psychological and emotional resonance, with appeal to today's audience of fans and readers, and still have it feature a hero? That is a question for next issue.●

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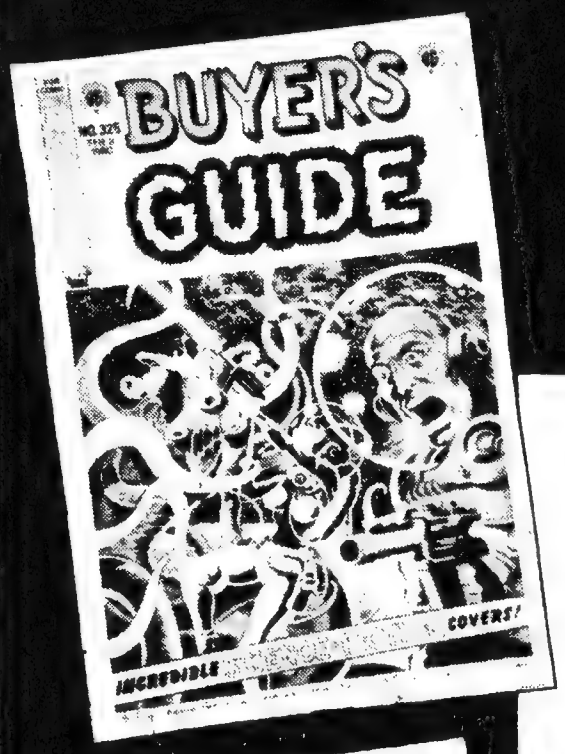

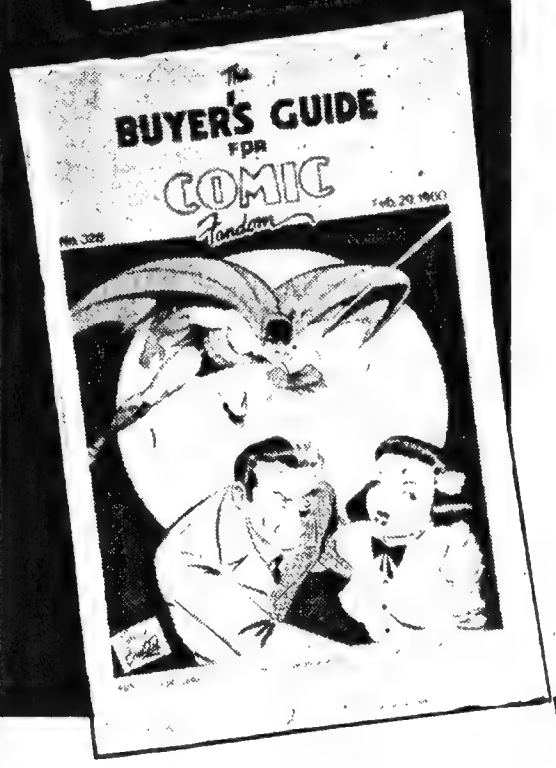

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THE WONDER WOMAN WHO WASN'T

by Murray R. Ward

More and more, as comics history progresses, it gets harder and harder to find experts in the field capable of remembering past stories, explaining away inconsistencies, and tying up loose ends in the chronicles of the super-heroes. Many of the original scripters of the Golden Age, and even the Silver Age, are simply no longer among us! Edmond Hamilton, Otto Binder, Mort Weisinger, Bill Finger, and France Herron come to mind. Others, such as Gardner Fox and John Broome, have left the comics field behind. Others still, while remaining connected with the industry, have been so long away from active participation in comics writing that their memories are no longer reliable when recalling details: Stan Lee is a perfect example. It then falls to the current crop of writers to carry on for these past giants, but only some of the newer [i.e., 1960s and later] writers are of a comics-historical bent. Roy Thomas has based many of his best Marvel stories on points raised or ideas left undeveloped in earlier tales, and he will undoubtedly do likewise in many of his upcoming works at DC. Steve Englehart in his turn drew a great number of his stories from the earlier work of both Lee and Thomas, and was very successful in his attempts to glue together a slightly fractured Marvel Universe. Many of DC's current staff, from Paul Levitz on down, are well-versed in the history of the characters, and it's been said that Marvel's Roger Stern is a virtual encyclopedia of data when it comes to the Marvel stories from **FANTASTIC FOUR #1** to the present. Nevertheless, keeping track of comics history is becoming a full-time job.

Next in line to take up the mantle of historian is the fan. Jerry Bails has provided literally volumes of writer-artist data in his **WHO'S WHO OF AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS** and other publications. George Olshevsky has delved into both the creators and the characters themselves in his **MARVEL COMICS INDEX** series. Gene Reed and the other members of APA-I [an amateur press association devoted to indexing, mostly of comics material] have done yeoman service on nearly every aspect of the four-color medium. Cat Yronwode has done exhaustive research of both **DR. STRANGE** and **THE SPIRIT.** And yet...and yet...

Murray Ward is a library assistant at the University of Manitoba, and a graduate of same, with a B.A. in English and Film. He has been a contributor to **COLLECTOR'S DREAM, COMICS FEATURE,** and APA-I.

Every once in a while, someone comes along to question one of the basic tenets of some comics legend. He formulates his thesis, one not commonly accepted by the masses of fandom, does his research, and sets his theory forth to be accepted or rejected by his peers. Last year, Marvel artist John Byrne questioned the derivation and function of Superman's powers in the pages of **THE COMIC READER.** He hypothesized that the abilities of the Man of Steel, most notably super-sight, super-hearing, and super-strength, could more logically be explained by Kal-El's possession of psionic powers than by the traditional reference to his hyper-energization by solar energy. Pro and con opinions have been coming in to Byrne and to **TCR** ever since.

Will fandom continue to accept Superman's proclivities and the origins thereof as given in the comics, will they turn to the Byrne version as truth, or will they seek a third explanation, perhaps incorporating the above two? It is up to the aforementioned comics scholars and others of their ilk to decide. It is also up to them to decide the worth of any other such new theory that may come along, such as the topic of this article, which is:

Wonder Woman's origin and powers—are they really magic after all?

Before setting forth this thesis, it may be necessary to differentiate, for the non-initiate, between the various personae of Wonder Woman. Like Superman, and like so many of the DC characters, Wonder Woman is not just one character but several. Basically, there are the Wonder Women of Earth-1, of Earth-2, and of the television series. Each is in many ways the same, and yet slightly different, from her sister incarnations, and these differences are central to the argument at hand, having to do as they do with both her origins and the nature of her powers.

The first, and original, Wonder Woman exists on

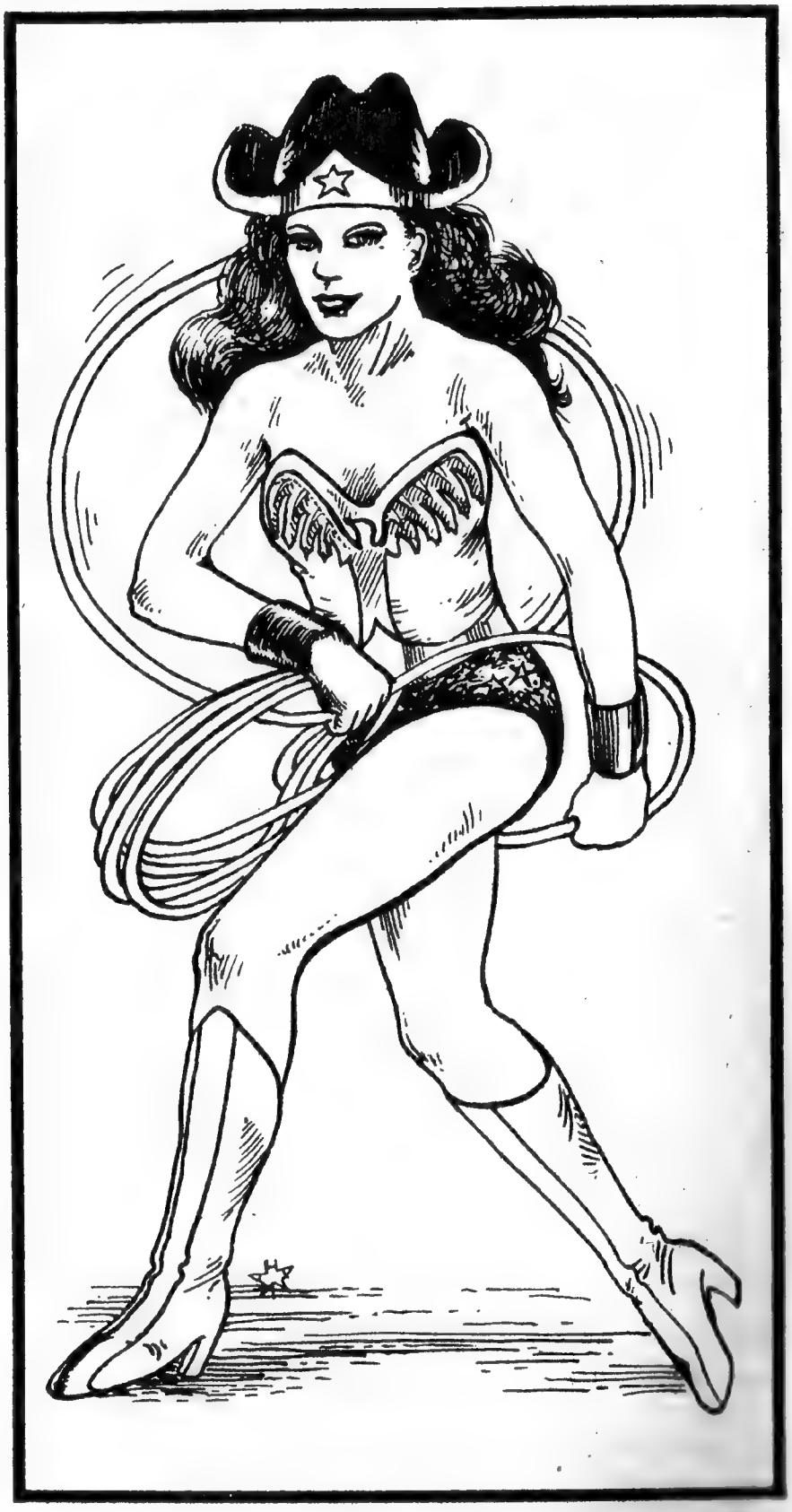
the parallel planet of Earth-2, and is a character of comics' Golden Age, the 1940s, and a member of the Justice Society of America. She made her first appearance in a back-up strip in **ALL-STAR COMICS #8**, took the lead spot in **SENSATION COMICS** from its first issue, and rapidly graduated to her own title. The **SENSATION** series finally petered out as the Golden Age drew to a close, but Wonder Woman's own comic was one of the few super-hero vehicles [and the only super-heroine title] that continued uninterrupted till the 60s Silver Age and on to the present day. Thus, as with Superman and Batman, whose adventures also continued in an unbroken string over the years, there is some confusion as to at what point the comic bearing her name ceases to chronicle the exploits of the Earth-2 version of the same character. For the purposes of this article, we will proceed with the not-untenable theory that the original heroine begins to be phased out with the departure of her original writer-artist team of William Moulton Marston [Charles Moulton] and Harry G. Peter, and is entirely supplanted by her counterpart with the revised retelling [or rather, the first telling] of the origin story in **WONDER WOMAN #105** [reprinted in **SECRET ORIGINS ANNUAL #1**].

Wonder Woman of Earth-2 is an Amazon maiden living on Paradise Island, home of the Amazon race. She is Princess Diana, daughter of the island's ruler, Queen Hippolyte. When Captain Steve Trevor of the U.S. Air Force crash-lands near the island, Diana rescues him, heals him, and falls in love with him. Subsequently, the goddess Aphrodite commands Hippolyte to send one of the Amazons to America to aid in the then-current war effort, and Diana is chosen, whereupon she dons the familiar costume and becomes Wonder Woman. The Amazons are an ancient race, dating back in time to ancient Greece, but Diana herself is younger than her immortal sisters, having been created at a point following the establishment of the Amazons on Paradise Island. Queen Hippolyte expressed the desire for a child, and was granted the power to bring a daughter to life, having first carved her infant form as a clay statue. The basic identifying characteristics of the Earth-2 Wonder Woman are then as follows: she is created from a statue; she is given her various powers by the Goddess Aphrodite; her "birth" follows the Amazons' journey to Paradise Island, to which they fled following a near-disastrous war with men led by the Greek god/hero Hercules; her initial costume includes a star-spangled skirt, which only later is changed to the traditional shorts; her lasso has the power to force those it encircles to obey her commands, and also to force her to obey anyone who uses it against her; all Amazons possess powers like hers, although she is the greatest warrior among them, and she preaches a doctrine that all women can gain such at-

tributes through will-power and training; if her bracelets are chained together by a man, she loses her strength, and if she removes the bracelets, she goes temporarily berserk, smashing everything in her path in a mad rage.

In **WONDER WOMAN #105**, Robert Kanigher recounts what is supposedly the origin of the Wonder Woman of Earth-1. This story, however, is so often contradicted in the years that follow that it must perforce be considered non-canonical as regards either Earth-1 or Earth-2, for all that it marks the beginning in the chronicles of a new series of Wonder Woman stories, which take place on Earth-1. According to Kanigher, Princess Diana is born [as opposed to being created from a statue] the child of Queen Hippolyta [note the altered spelling] and a man, supposedly her husband [either a king or a royal consort], who is never seen nor mentioned. At her birth, the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology appear and gift her with her individual powers: wisdom from Athena, beauty from Aphrodite, speed from Mercury, and strength from Hercules. As a young Wonder Girl, Diana possesses powers as far above those of the other Amazons as those of Superman are above ordinary humans'. Then, Kanigher tells us, there follows a catastrophic war in which "all the men are wiped out" and only the women are left. They set sail in a fleet of ships built speedily with the help of the super-powered Diana [still a prepubescent girl] and arrive at Paradise Island, where they establish their all-female civilization under the magical guidance of the goddesses. As in the original origin, it is forbidden for any man to set foot on Paradise Island, and so it remains until Major Steve Trevor [note his promotion] crash-lands there. In this incarnation, the World War II motif is removed and the story from this point takes place in the then-present day of the 1950 s. War or no war, Diana is still sent back to Man's World, as the Amazons persist in calling it, garbed as Wonder Woman, to return Trevor, with whom she has begun to fall in love, to his own people. This origin also introduces us to a Hippolyta who is a statuesque blonde, whereas the Earth-2 Hippolyte had at first been auburn-haired, then a virtual duplicate of her daughter in appearance. Almost every aspect of this origin is ignored in all later retellings, mostly but not always in favor of details from the version in **ALL-STAR #8** and the original Golden Age series. In the later versions, the statue-created origin is back, the Amazons' slain menfolk are expunged entirely, and the gods do not bestow individual gifts on the baby princess. Hercules returns to his role as the Amazons' oppressor, not a beneficent deity, and teams with the war-god Mars to attack them. The Kanigher Wonder Woman may exist somewhere, but it is not in the traditional DC Universe of Earths 1 and 2.

The accepted attributes of the Earth-1 Wonder Woman are these: she too is supposedly created from a statue [and as is later revealed, so is her black "twin" sister, Nubia]; she supposedly derives her powers from Aphrodite, and there is some question as to how much greater they are than the abilities of a "normal" Amazon [one of her Amazon sisters replaces her as Wonder Woman without any goddess-given aid in a more recent tale]; her creation follows the trip to Paradise Island [she was named not after the goddess of the hunt, but after a companion of her queen-mother's who perished heroically on the voyage]; her costume never had a skirt; her lasso forces people to obey her, and the situation is reversed when it is used against her; she never tries to claim that "all women can become Wonder Women"; she likewise must avoid allowing her bracelets to be chained together or removed, although it is some time before this latter property is brought out in the stories. Unlike the Earth-2 Ama-



AT WONDER WOMAN'S GENTLE QUESTIONING...
WHAT AN AMAZING RESEMBLANCE! BUT THAT'S ALL THAT'S ALIKE! MY HEART'S BREAKING TO JOIN MY FIANCE'--A MINING ENGINEER! HE'S TRYING TO MAKE HIS FORTUNE IN SOUTH AMERICA SO HE CAN SEND FOR ME! BUT HE HAS FAILED SO FAR! IT LOOKS AS THOUGH WE'LL BE SEPARATED FOREVER!
IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP YOU?
THAT'S WHEN THE AMAZON INGENIOUSLY PROPOSED...
YOU WANT TO BE WITH YOUR FIANCE IN SOUTH AMERICA! AND I WANT TO NURSE STEVE TREVOR, YOUR PATIENT, IN THIS HOSPITAL! I'LL TAKE YOUR PLACE! I'M A QUALIFIED AMAZON NURSE! WE'RE DOUBLES--NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE!
©1980 DC Comics
On Earth-2, Princess Diana pays off Diana Prince for use of her name and credentials.

zon, who borrowed the identity of a nurse, Diana Prince, who wished to leave the country to be with her fiance, the Earth-1 version merely assumes the name, formulating it from her real given name and her title of "Princess." The word "supposedly" pops up a few times in the foregoing list. This is intentional, as we shall see that while not as obviously incorrect as the Kanigher version, this origin too is somewhat suspect in detail.

One aspect brought out in the later Kanigher stories is the existence of Wonder Woman adventures on Paradise Island before she began her superheroine career in the outside world. As a toddler called Wonder Tot, and a young teenager called Wonder Girl, each wearing a cut-down version of the later costume, Diana performs feats akin to those of Superman's earlier selves, Superbaby and Superboy. In a series of so-called [and rightly so] "Impossible Tales," the three identities of Wonder Woman are made to co-exist simultaneously and join forces against a number of villains, along with Queen Hippolyta, who at one point is even called Wonder Queen. There are no such stories in the Earth-2 canon, and their existence in the Earth-1 legend is largely ignored today, although the fact that Diana possessed her powers before becoming an adult is uncontested. The significance of these tales comes to bear when, in **THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD #60**, the teenage Wonder Girl suddenly appears to join forces with Robin, Kid Flash, and Aqualad, as the Teen Titans. She is shown to be an inhabitant of Paradise Island, where her sole guardians are Wonder Woman and Queen Hippolyta. For years no one questions who she can possibly be: she cannot be Wonder Woman as a young girl, for the two cannot co-exist, and even if they could, having Wonder Girl enter the outside world of the present negates Wonder Woman's origin in which she first enters Man's World after the rescue of Steve Trevor. Neither can she be Wonder Woman's younger sister, as some of the readers, unfamiliar with the origin story, wrote in to suggest. Plainly, Wonder Woman cannot have a younger sister unless there is something we have not been told: she herself is the youngest person on Paradise Island. All the other Amazons are over 2000 years old, having been born in ancient Greece and later rendered immortal [like the Norse gods, the Amazons cannot die of natural causes, but can be slain in battle or by the intervention of spells or deities]; how much younger Diana is, we do not know, as the time of her origin could be anywhere from immediately after the Amazons arrive on the island to about twenty years before Trevor crash-lands there, but she is younger, and no one on the island is younger than she. Even if we follow the improbable Kanigher story which gives Wonder Woman a long-dead father, she cannot have a sister younger that herself: who would father such a child? Did Hippolyta wish for, and receive, the power to animate a second [or third, counting Nubia] clay statue?

The answer finally comes in **TEEN TITANS #22**, in which Wonder Girl is at last given a proper origin, and even a real name. A human infant rescued from a fire by Wonder Woman, and with no trace of her parents' identity to be found, she is adopted by the Amazons and taken to live on the island. However, being "merely human" and without their greater powers, she is handicapped and regarded as a cripple until the miraculous Purple Healing Ray is adapted to charge her with all the powers possessed by Wonder Woman herself, whereupon she begins her frequent forays into the outside world as a Teen Titan. This is the first canonical appearance of the Purple Ray on Earth-1. In the Earth-2 stories, it is invented by Princess Diana and first used to heal Steve Trevor after his crash, and later it is improved by the Amazon scientist Paula to the point where it can be used to literally bring several members of the Justice Society back from the dead. On Earth-1, however, it is used for the first time to convey super-powers upon the newly-named Donna Troy [an assumed name, it should be noted, since she doesn't ever learn her true identity].

Long before Wonder Girl joins the Teen Titans, Wonder Woman has become a charter member of the Justice League of America, the Earth-1 counterpart to the Justice Society. It is in her adventures with them that we first begin to suspect that some-

thing is amiss in the accepted version of her origin. But first, just to avoid undue confusion, there is still a third incarnation of the Amazon Princess to be dealt with.

The third Wonder Woman appears in the TV series devoted to the character, which was cancelled in 1979. This Wonder Woman lives in two separate epochs: World War II and the present. She is not, as in the comics, a different heroine in a different world in each series of adventures, however; rather, the same Wonder Woman who fought spies in the 1940s, her appearence unchanged due to her immortality, reappears in the 1970s to battle more modern villains, albeit in a very slightly altered costume. Her first origin story omits all reference to the statue-creation, but otherwise follows Diana from being the daughter of the Amazon queen [blond-haired as on Earth-1] to the super-heroine of the outside world, who masquerades as Diana Prince [again, an assumed name] and dotes on Colonel [another promotion] Steve Trevor of Army Intelligence. Her powers are supposedly the same as those of all Amazons, as no goddesses are credited with her abilities. Likewise, the Amazons have seemingly always lived on Paradise Island, which the TV series later locates within the mysterious Bermuda Triangle. Wonder Woman's costume still has no skirt, but she does have a fancy dress cape, which she wears at social functions although not in battle. While the Earth-1 heroine will eventually incorporate into her lasso the power to transform her Diana Prince garments into her Amazon garb by spinning, the TV character has merely to spin herself about and will the transformation from Dianna Prince to Wonder Woman to occur, in a Shazam-like flash of light and [presumably unheard by other characters in the story] a thunderclap. Aside from this, the lasso's powers are toned down considerably; rather than forcing others to obey, it merely compels them to tell the truth—as such, it is useless as a weapon to be turned back upon Wonder Woman herself. The entire mystique about her bracelets, other than their bullet-repelling ability, is forgotten; however, Wonder Woman is given a new weakness in the form of her belt. In the words of Queen Hippolyta, the belt "enables her to retain her Amazon strength in Man's World." Although this idea is seldom used in the series, at least once or twice a gang of men are able to surprise Wonder Woman and slip her belt off, whereupon she becomes no stronger than a normal female and is easily knocked unconscious or tossed into a restraining cell.

The two Wonder Woman eras of TV are explained when, as the series shifts networks in the middle of its run, the WWII stories are dropped entirely; having returned to Paradise Island after the end of the war and discarding her cover as mousy Army Lieutenant Prince, Wonder Woman is called back to action when the **son** of her old paramour, Steve Trevor, Junior, crash-lands you-know-where. She fakes computer records to recreate her Diana Prince identity and returns to the outside world to become a government agent and super-heroine. **This** Diana Prince, however, is no wallflower. She immediately abandons her prissy pose, and after a few adventures, even forgoes her disguising glasses. Still, like the original Capt. Marvel before her [or more appropriately, Mary Marvel], the only way anyone else can learn her secret is to catch her in the act of switching identities; no one ever guesses that Diana is Wonder Woman, even though they look exactly alike. And at the same time, she picks up a new power: not only can she change identities by spinning, but she can also thus transform her costume into a skindiving wetsuit, motorcycling regalia, etc., as the circumstances require. [This trick, incidentally, is presently a staple of the Japanese animation superheroine known as Cuty Honny—yes, it's pronounced Cutey Honey.]

Before transferring to modern times, however, the TV series introduces a few other new twists on the Amazon legend. This Wonder Woman, too, has a kid sister, who is periodically called Wonder Girl, but who is actually a younger Amazon [she really **is** WW's sister] named Drusilla. She matches Wonder Woman exactly one-on-one: when she follows her to

ANYONE CAN SEE THOSE ARE TWO SEPERATE STRIPS OF FILM, MOTHER!
THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVEN'T BEEN SPLICED TOGETHER YET...
SWIFTLY, QUEEN HIPPOLYTA SPLICED THE FILM AND...
THERE! I'VE ADDED PICTURES OF YOU AND ME...WALKING DOWN THOSE SAME STEPS! AND SPLICED THEM ALL TOGETHER SO THEY RUN THROUGH AS ONE!
THUNDERBOLTS OF JOVE, MOTHER! IT... IT REALLY LOOKS AS IF THE IMPOSSIBLE IS HAPPENING! AS IF THE WHOLE WONDER WOMAN FAMILY IS TOGETHER AT THE SAME TIME AND THE SAME PLACE!
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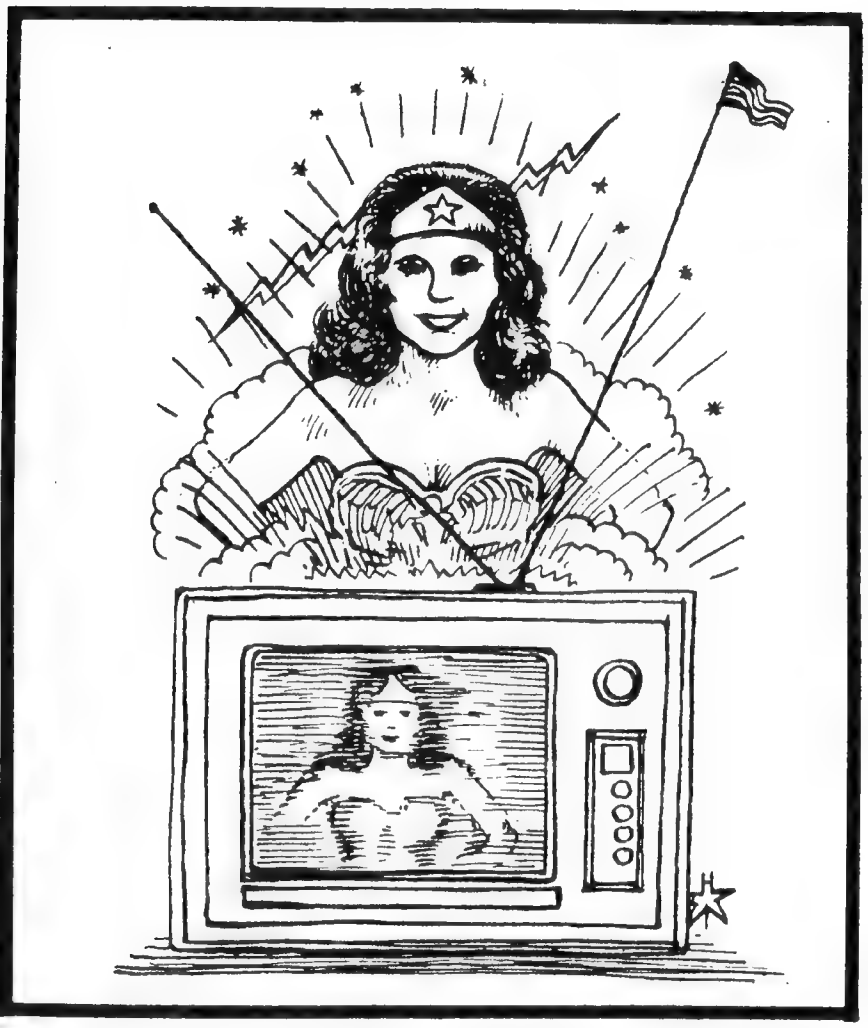
Man's World, her cover is teenager Drusilla Prince, and when she spins herself around, she is instantly garbed in a smaller [and tighter, girl-watchers!] version of the famous uniform. This brings us back to the old problem of how Wonder Woman can have a kid sister when there are no men, and thus no births, on Paradise Island. No explanation is ever offered, but then, Diana herself is unexplained, as the statue-origin is left out on television.



In the same two-part episode that introduces Drusilla, another piece of Amazon legend is smashed in the TV version. In every other incarnation of the Wonder Woman story, men are forbidden to set foot on Paradise Island, and great pains are taken to explain how Steve Trevor was able to do so in the first story without activating the curse [some say he crashed on a smaller nearby island, while others claim he crashed in the sea and was carried by Diana to the palace hospital—thus keeping his feet from touching the ground, you see, so he didn't "set foot" anywhere]. Just what the curse **is** seems open to question—some say the island and all the Amazons would be destroyed if it were violated, while a more recent explanation has it that all the Amazons would be compelled to fall in love with the man who defied the edict and would destroy themselves with jealousy over him. Whatever the reason, the curse is inoperative in the **WONDER WOMAN**-TV Universe. In **"The Feminum Mystique"** [Feminum being the TV name for Amazonium, the metal of which the bracelets are made], Paradise Island is successfully invaded by men of the very worst kind—Nazis. Unwilling to believe Wonder Woman's warnings that men oculd possibly defeat them, the Amazons are quickly sleep-gassed into submission, their bracelets removed, and enslaved. [They get out of it through the combined efforts of Wonder Woman and Wonder Girl, who get their bracelets back.]

Thus, we have the three "selves" of Wonder Woman: the traditional goddess-sponsored Amazon of Earth-2 on the one hand, and the TV heroine with the totally inexplicable origin on the other, while the Earth-1 product stands in the gap between. I have no quarrel with the Earth-2 legend. The Wonder Woman who joins the JSA is both as immortal and as magical as her creator, Dr. Marston, claims she is. Likewise, I'm willing to ignore the television character, now that her series, in both its milieus, has been shelved. I can think of no explanation for Amazons who are at once created as unaging immortals and who at the same time come in old [TV's Hippolyta appears middle-aged], young [WW herself , who claims to be "only 2,327 years old"], and very young Drusilla, [the sole teenybopper on the island] varieties. It is the Earth-1 super-heroine, the Wonder Woman of today's comics, who grew half out of Golden Age tradition and half out of Robert Kanigher's sideways mythology, whose beginnings and **raison d'etre** I wish to question.

The first time Wonder Woman's true origin secret is let out of the proverbial bag in in the pages of **JUSTICE LEAGUE #2**. For those who don't remember it or have never read it, here's the basic story. There exists "alongside" Earth, another dimension in which magic holds sway, a parallel Earth-world called, for want of a better name, Magic-Land. Earth, on the other hand, which is to say, Earth-1, is a world where scientific law rules. Three evil magicians of Magic-Land conspire to exchange the two worlds into each other's dimensions. Thus, Earth becomes a world where magic works and science doesn't, and Magic-Land becomes dominated by the three ex-sorcerers, the only inhabitants of their world who have studied any science. As a result of the changeover, the Justice League members lose their super-powers, which are based on science.

Now, wait a minute! Superman, we are told, gains his powers from lighter gravity and solar rays, while J'Onn J'Onzz likewise becomes super-powered due to the differences between the Martian and Earthly environments. Batman's utility-belt gimmicks are scientific in origin, as are Green Lantern's Guardian-given Power Ring, Aquaman's heredity-granted traits, and Flash's chemicals-and-lightning-originated super-speed. But Wonder Woman is supposed to owe her powers to magic. Yet she loses her powers just as readily as her team mates. Why? Gardner Fox doesn't catch this seeming error in his story, and Julius Schwartz doesn't pick up on it when he edits the tale. The readers, steeped as they are in Schwartz's **FLASH** and **GL** and in Weisinger-edited **SUPERMAN**, know little or nothing of the Amazing Amazon outside of what they read about her in **JLA**. If a **JUSTICE LEAGUE** story says Wonder

Woman loses her powers along with everybody else in the League, that makes perfect sense to your average **JLA** fan. But, as we have seen, it definitely doesn't make sense!

AS THE CHRONAL MISTS FADE AWAY...
GREAT HERA! I'VE BEEN DISPLACED IN TIME--AND I'M NOW ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MACHINE THAT TOOK AWAY OUR SUPER-POWERS!
I FEEL POWERLESS-- IF I WERE SURROUNDED BY FLAMES!
THAT'S MARTIAN MANHUNTER'S VOICE! THAT MEANS I'M DUE TO LOSE MY SUPER-POWERS NEXT!
20
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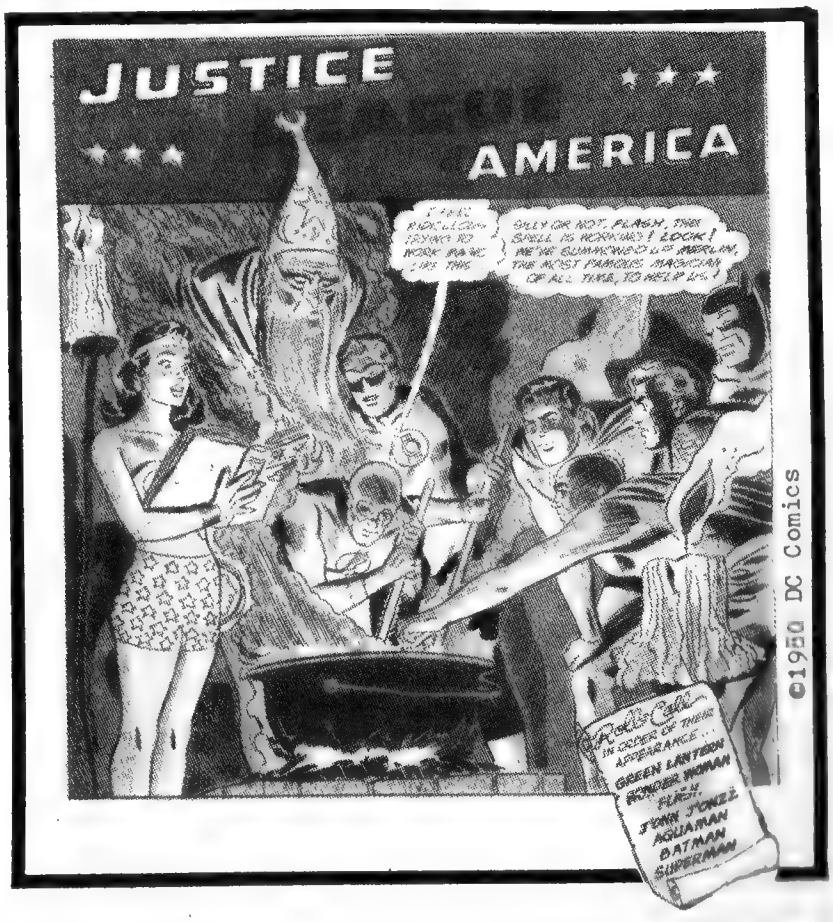
A possible out is offered in **JUSTICE LEAGUE #59**. In this story, aliens called the Impossibles [no relation to Frankenstein Junior's cartoon pals] decide to take away the super-powers of those Justice League members who have not **earned** their abilities, but received them by accident or by dint of birth. Again, Flash's speed is wiped out, and Superman, Aquaman, and the Martian Manhunter lose their inherited abilities. Wonder Woman is also an apparent victim, but as she later discovers, she is transplanted thru time to smash the aliens' power-stealing device before it can affect her. Thus, she initially only seems to lose her powers, being overcome by the unconscious power of suggestion after seeing what befell the other members. One could suggest that this is also what happened to her in **JLA #2**, that she really didn't lose her powers but just thought she did, because everyone else did. But in the Impossible adventure, we are dealing with a case of science destroying the gifts of heredity and other science, whereas in **JLA #2**, it's a case of magic vs. science, and Wonder Woman is under no delusion about her own origins. She **knows** her powers are supposed to be magical in nature, so why would she unconsciously convince herself otherwise, to the detriment of herself and her comrades? No, Wonder Woman really becomes powerless in **"Secret of the Sinister Sorcerers."** Again, why?

The vital clue lies, of all places, in **GREEN LANTERN #111-112**. In this story, we learn that when they first established their regime of order over chaos in the Earth-1 universe, the Guardians, GL's Oan mentors, gathered together all the magic energies of their dimension and stored that power in the heart of a star, creating the magical Starheart. Some magic escaped their notice, of course, but as a Guardian tells Green Arrow, "our efforts were **generally** successful," and magic becomes the rare exception, rather than the rule, in the world of Earth-1. Part of the accumulated energy of the Starheart makes the dimensional jump to Earth-2, thus increasing the magic-content of that world, and achieves sentience, becoming the Green Flame of Life which empowers the lamp and ring of the Earth-2 Green Lantern. Thus, we learn **why** Earth-1 is a world of science, not magic. Unlike Magic-Land, where mystical creatures run riot over the continents of Asgard, Olympus, and Oceana, Earth-1 is by and large ruled by scientific law.

This makes for a difference in the nature of superheroes on Earth-1 and Earth-2. On Earth-2, where there is more than enough magic to go around [although not as much as on Magic-Land, where there is no science], consider how many members of the Justice Society owe their abilities to mystic means: Green Lantern, Dr. Fate, the Spectre, Johnny Thunder, and of course, Wonder Woman. Besides these, there are their various supporting pantheons [GL's Green Flame, Fate's alien otherself, Spectre's unnamed deity, Johnny's Bahdnisians, and WW's gods and goddesses] and equally powerful villains, all dependent on magic to exist. On Earth-1, on the other hand, there is very little magic. Enough for Felix Faust to cast spells with the aid of the legendary Necronomicon, but he is only one evil magician. Enough to support the Three Demons known as Abnegazar, Rath, and Ghast, but they hail from a prehistoric era,



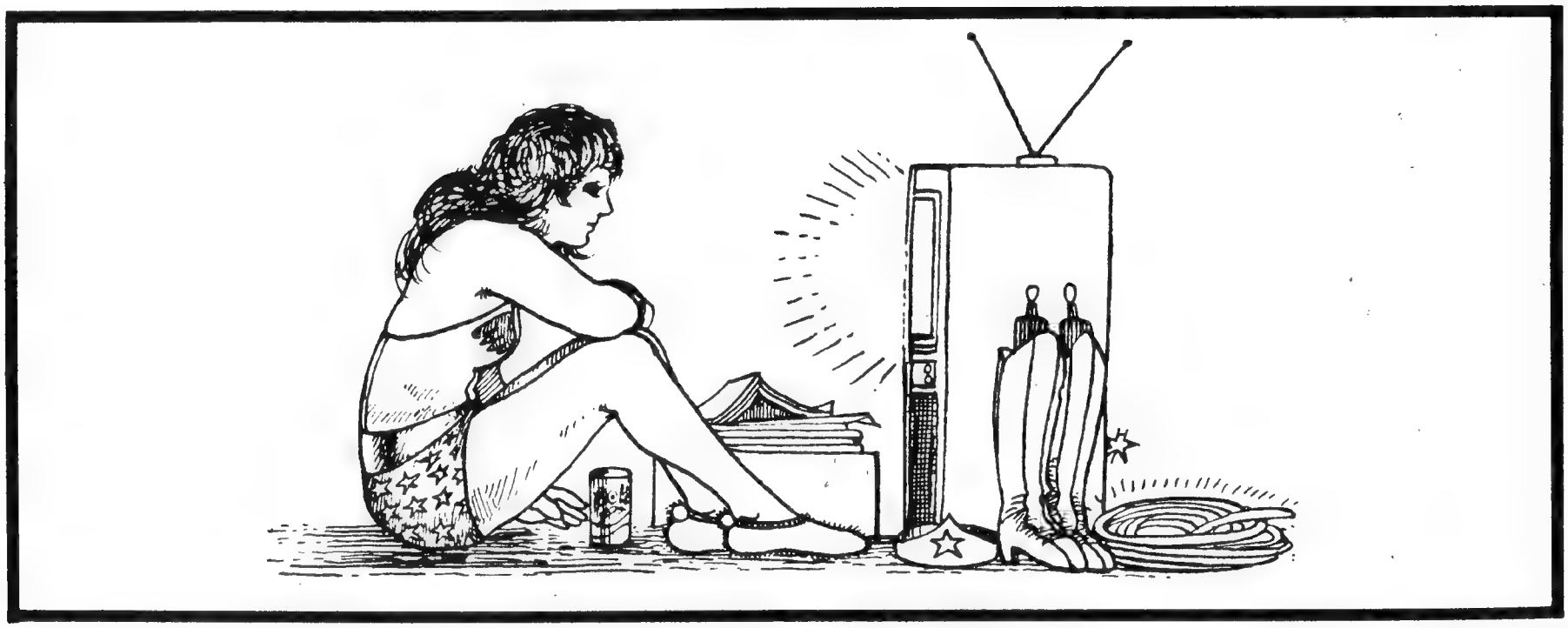
perhaps before the Guardians gathered the magic of their universe into the Starheart, and as Dr. Fate would opine, their creation is "accomplished magic, and as such, it cannot be undone." Enough to allow Mordru to terrorize the world of the 30th century, but again, he is only a single individual, no matter how mighty, and besides, who knows but that magic may have somehow increased by the 30th century? The Justice League makes do totally without magical help until the Phantom Stranger, whose powers are unexplained but at least **seem** magical in nature, begins to aid them periodically, and until Zatanna joins them as their second-latest member. There just isn't enough magical energy rampant in the Earth-1 universe to support more than a few sorcerers of any ability, unless they draw on a power outside the universe itself, an extra-dimensional source of magic. Thus, there is not enough magic to allow for the existence of a whole island of immortal, goddess-created Amazons!

This is borne out in the beginning of the series of stories in which Wonder Woman gives up her extranormal abilities and lives as plain Diana Prince for a number of years, starting in issue **#179** of her own title. The Amazons, island and all, are forced to leave Earth and retreat for a time into another new dimension to recharge their powers. Why? Because, as we have seen, there is not enough magic on Earth-1 to support them. Queen Hippolyta says in this issue that their magic is "exhausted," and must be "replenished." When the Amazons go, they take Wonder Woman's powers with them. Wonder Girl, however, given her powers by the Purple Ray, retains them.

Now, wait a minute, again! Isn't everything on Paradise Island magical in nature? Why do the effects of the Purple Ray, an Amazon creation, linger when Wonder Woman's powers do not?

The Purple Healing Ray, in both its incarnations, is described as a product of Amazon **science**. Thus, there is nothing magical about it, and Wonder Girl's powers [to say nothing of the cures and such effected by the ray] remain intact, despite the loss of Amazon magic. But this is the first inkling we have had that the Amazons possess a working science that does not in any way depend on magic as a power source. Could it be that this explains the problem of the Amazons' existence in a world where there was never enough magic to allow their initial creation, and the problem of Wonder Woman's powers being lost by the transposition of Earth and Magic-Land?

Yes. It is my theory that Wonder Woman only **thinks** her powers are magic. They are actually scientific and hereditary. Thus, in **JUSTICE LEAGUE #2**, she loses her powers along with the others, because her powers are owed to science, albeit Amazon science. It is, rather, in **WONDER WOMAN #179** that she loses her abilities through the power of suggestion. She is thoroughly convinced, through lifelong conditioning, that her powers and everything else on Paradise Island, except a few artifacts such as the Healing Ray, are magical. In **JLA #2**, she seems genuinely confused and dismayed to find herself powerless, and probably never finds a satisfactory explanation for this condition. Eventually, after **JLA #59**, perhaps she puts it down to the power of suggestion. Finding herself surrounded by powerless science-based heroes, she became powerless herself, she supposes. But Wonder Woman, so often deceived by the machinations of her mother and sister Amazons [as when she is forced to forget the entire non-powered phase of her career, and the first "death" of Steve Trevor], has it exactly backwards. In the **JUSTICE LEAGUE** story, she **did** lose her powers, which are science-based. In **WONDER**



WOMAN #179, she merely convinced herself that her powers departed with the Amazons. [Wonder Girl, who **knows** her powers are scientific in origin, could be allowed to retain them in the Amazons' absence.]

How can the attributes of Wonder Woman be accounted for, if we presume they are scientific in origin? As we have seen, another Amazon besides Princess Diana can fulfill the Wonder Woman role; thus, her powers are really no greater than those of a "normal" Amazon, although her skill at using them is greater. Wonder Woman has Amazon powers not because she was gifted with them by Aphrodite, but because she is an Amazon and they all have those powers. Perhaps the infrequent sojourns to the other dimension to "recharge" themselves are what gives them these powers, together with their immortality, or perhaps they are simply a non-human race of women who possess super-powers, which are inherited—in the unlikely event that they should produce offspring. This cannot be ascertained without more data.

As regards the heroine's various accoutrements: her lasso could as easily be a scientific device as a magical one. Its ability to force those entwined in it to obey is really no more fantastic then the powers of Green Lantern's ring. [In the TV incarnation, the lasso even makes a computerish sound in operation.] As to her bracelets, the loss of power when they are chained and the berserk rage when they are removed are things ingrained in Wonder Woman from birth: more conditioning. We have seen in recent issues that she is capable of controlling her rage without her bracelets when she is forced to; presumably, this is a feat undreamt-of in Amazon history, as far as she knows. Actually, of course, there is no rage to be controlled, and chaining her bracelets only renders her unable to use her powers to escape because that is what she has been brought up to believe. This may be Hippolyta's way of providing Wonder Woman with a humility-producing weakness, as Marvel's Odin did for Thor when he reincarnated him as the lame Dr. Blake and caused him to revert to mortal form after sixty seconds without his hammer.

This also explains why Earth-1's Amazon Princess never tries to proclaim that "all women can become Wonder Women"—in her heart of hearts, she knows this is a crock. Only Amazons can become Wonder Women, because they are that way to begin with.

Of course, this still leaves unexplained the "birth" of our heroine. If the Amazons have no magic, if the gods are not responsible for Diana's powers, how is it that she was created out of a clay statue, by magic? [For that matter, if transposition into a magic world causes science-based super-heroes to lose their abilities, would not entering a science world cause Wonder Woman not only to lose her powers, but to change into a clay statue again, were she truly a magical character?]

This is exactly why Diana must be convinced that the Amazons are magic, that she herself is of magical origin and powers, and why she can never be allowed to learn otherwise. This is because she was not created out of a statue by magic. Robert Kanigher was in part correct, after all. Diana was born, not made! She was not the offspring of a group of incredibly unlucky male companions to the pre-Paradise Island Amazons who managed to get himself and all his comrades-in-arms wiped out in a single battle, however. The gentleman's name was Hercules!

Consider Queen Hippolyta's recounting of the Amazon legend. Gifted with the "magic" girdle of Aphrodite, the Amazons were always victorious in battle [none of this Kanigher nonsense about letting the men go off to fight the wars alone, please]. Then, after they defeated the forces of Hercules, Hippolyta and the enemy leader met in a tent to discuss peace terms. The graphics of the original story, the Golden Age version on which subsequent retellings for both incarnations are based, shows Hercules swaying Hippolyta with compliments, and talking her into letting him hold the magic girdle, upon which he runs off with it, and the Amazons, deprived of their magic talis-

man, are defeated and enslaved. Much later, Aphrodite delivers them out of captivity [Old Testament, anyone?] and sends them off to set up their all-female civilization on the island. The trick is to ignore the pictures and concentrate on the words. Since there is no magic, Hippolyta is lying to Diana when she tells this story, but she cannot bring herself to lie outright, so some of the words are true but their meaning is warped. The Amazons are victorious in battle because they possess super-human powers, not because of a magic girdle, but the girdle, symbolic as it is, must be introduced into the legend at this point. Then, as to the meeting with Hercules, Hippolyta says, "He tricked me. He used woman's own weapon against me. He made love to me." Diana, and the reader, assumes that Hercules whispered sweet nothings in Hippolyta's ear, and stole the girdle. What he accomplished, of course, was much more than that, and what he stole from Hippolyta was more than a mere girdle. When Hippolyta says, "He made love to me," she means exactly that.

And an unaccounted time later, through no agency more magical than human [or super-human] biology, Princess Diana was born! Not created out of a clay statue, but born of her mother, Queen Hippolyta, as issue **#105** attests.

Of course, Diana cannot be allowed to find this out. It may be that the other Amazons are similarly duped concerning her origins, and that only the Queen knows the truth. The true origin of Wonder Woman gives the lie to everything the Amazons supposedly believe in, when their mightiest heroine is [like Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner] the child of a mixed "marriage" with an enemy outsider, and the product of their queen's shameful seduction. Like many horrific events in our own history, the true story has been totally suppressed and a colorful legend fabricated to take its place. The legend borrows from the truth, hides some of it, embellishes some of it, and obscures it completely. Meanwhile, the new version with its mystic curse against ever allowing a man to set foot on Paradise Island serves the end of never allowing this awful piece of history to repeat itself.

The Amazons do have their patron goddess, though, although being in an inaccessible other dimension, they cannot grant super-powers, but only communicate with their worshippers on occasion. And unlike the Judeo-Christian deity, the goddesses do occasionally intervene, one such instance being their decision to send one Amazon as a sort of "civilization scout" to Man's World. That Diana, who stands to lose the most, indeed the whole foundation on which her life is based, by finding out the truth about her origins [which is more likely to occur to her after a lengthy stay in the outside world], would be the Amazon chosen to become Wonder Woman was a trick of fate that could not have been foreseen. Is it any wonder that Hippolyta is always importuning her daughter to return to her island home to stay? The longer she remains Wonder Woman, the greater the likelihood that she will learn... the truth!

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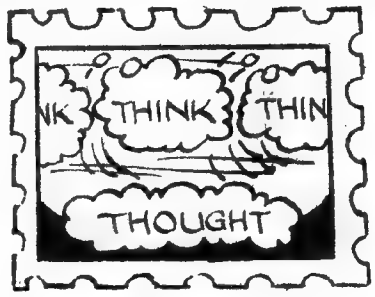

SOME EXEMPLARY COMICS OF TODAY

by James Van Hise

What makes a good comic? These days many people might feel easier asking the converse of that, but that's too easy. It's simple to pick up a comic and pick it apart and say what's wrong with it, but I think it's much more difficult to say what makes a successful comic in terms of conception and execution. I think the best way to demonstrate this would be with some recent books.

Now, first let me establish my point of view. I like comic art and enjoy a wide variety of styles, but I don't feel that fine art is the end all and be all of a comic. Fine comic art is not the means to an end but merely one of the tools for achieving the end result. To me, story is just as important as art because the finest art around cannot save a dumb story. Witness WEIRDWORLD, which to me is a prime example of a book where all the attention was lavished on the art and no one seemed to sit down and decide whether the story supported it or did nothing more than give the artists something to draw and fill up pages, but the less said about **that** fiasco the better.

Years ago, back in the beginning of the "Marvel Age of Comics," Stan Lee brought a special magic to his titles. That magic was an unusual story which may have been full of flashy gimicks or strange ideas, but which nonetheless gripped the reader with that elusive quality some call the Sense Of Wonder. Now what I'm talking about here is an **idea** that would be presented in an interesting manner and then handled with drive and enthusiasm. They lacked the assembly-line look of other comics of the time and seemed to have a lot of thought expended on each one. One example of this is that the characters had lives and lifestyles that changed and advanced, rather than remaining static like the Batman/Robin backdrop and the Clark Kent as the reporter-who-never-advanced syndrome. Thus we had the Fantastic Four who went through many moods and changes in just their first twenty issues, as well as Thor, the X-Men and the Avengers who also did unusual and interesting things in their early issues.

So in discussing what makes a good comic, return to those early Marvels, and examine them in relation to what came later and what exists now. There was constant change in those issues, and a ceaseless stream of ideas. One reason for this could be answered by the simple fact that the books were yet too young to fall into any sort of pattern of self-imitation, and this is certainly true. But this can't explain all of it. Going back and reading these early issues can be a revelation in regards to what **isn't** being done in most books today. Take SPIDER-MAN **#10** for an example. This is an average early issue with a mystery villain and a gang of non-super-powered hoods. It seems like it would be a tiresome tale, but it isn't! Upon rereading 16 years later, it is still a very strong

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well-thought-out story, and it remains effective enough that you're still almost convinced that J. Jonah Jameson is the mystery villain even though you **know** it isn't so! There is an **intensity** which remains unsullied by the passage of time.

This freshness in an old story is all to often missing in today's books because of an attitude of "Let's get this written and get it done," instead of "Let's get this written and develop it some more." Editors today seem more concerned with getting books together on time and making sure every phase meets the deadline instead of seeing if the story is as good as it **can be.**

I suppose at this point I should trot out a parade of example of comics which fail at this, but instead I'll just ask you, how often do you read a comic wherein the characters seem like real people as opposed to merely being characters?

When you rad a comic you like a lot, isn't it because it seemed real, and not just a story about some garishly garbed personalities? For a story to succeed it should touch you somewhere that you know you've been and can relate too.

What I seek in a successful comic book story is drama, as opposed to melodrama. I define melodrama as Lon Chaney Jr. grimacing and clenching both fists and teeth while he curses his fate and what he becomes under a full moon. Melodrama is done

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with broad strokes. Drama uses subtle ones which convince more adequately.

MARVEL TEAM-UP #100 was much more like what a good comic should be. It had a lot of cliches (super-hero manipulated against his will, good guys vs. bad guys) but it was handled well. The villainess was a person with a background, and the Vietnamese angle was more than just knee-jerk liberalism since her twin brother was portrayed as her exact antithesis. When the fight ends, it is the woman who conquers, and the super-heroes are in second place. Even the line of dialogue from the Thing when he responds to Spider-Man's question about what was done to Tran sounds real and human. It's the small touches that elevate it above the commonplace.

Everything I've discussed here about what makes a successful comic book has to do with the writer approaching the characters as if they were real people and having them respond as same. This doesn't mean the hand-wringing anguish of the Soap Opera, but rather the subtle, real introspection that everyone goes through every day in the most commonplace of circumstances, both dramatic and undramatic.

Reality does not have to be obvious, even in a comic book. In the land of flying fists, subtelty is acceptable. In fact, it can even be exciting. ●

WHY WOMEN DON'T READ COMICS

by Carol B. Kalish

So there I was, just sitting there sipping my tea while reading the latest batch of new comics. Suddenly my eye was caught by the cover of **DAREDEVIL #166**. "Oh, goodie," I chortled to myself, "Foggy's wedding. I don't like Foggy, but I love weddings." Eagerly I opened the book only to shrink back in horror at what lay before my eyes. I threw the comic in disgust over my shoulder. [The comic, for those who are interested, struck my Baron Karza, who was perched precariously on the refrigerator. Both comic and super-villain/toy plummeted to their doom and were seen nevermore by man—although I did notice the kittens playing with pieces of Karza a little later.] What caused this show of repugnance, you inquire while looking anxiously around for the men in the white jackets? Well you might ask! It was nothing less than the outrageous concoction that purported to pass as **Heather's hat** [see page 1 of **DAREDEVIL #166** for a look at the offensive item] that provoked me to such unusual shows of violence and vehemence.

You have by now probably glanced anxiously at my title to reassure yourself that my purported theme is indeed **"Why Women Don't Read Comics"** and not, as you might justifiably suspect, **"The Life And Bizarre Times of Carol Kalish."** Admittedly my descent into True Confessions might seem a bit peculiar, but it does ultimately relate to my subject. For while I still persist in my belief that the hat in question was as unsuitable for the occasion as it was unbecoming to the wearer, my main objection to the item of apparel lies more in the realm of theory than it does in the specifics of the case. For Heather's Hat is, for me at least, a symbol of all the myriad [but often related] reasons why women don't read comics.

Now before all my fellow female comic enthusiasts rise up in anger and quite rightly point out that they read comics, allow me to point out that the comics medium is held by both the fans and the industry's marketing experts to be more popular among males than females. All of Marvel's, DC's, and **HEAVY METAL**'s reader surveys and advertising demographics indicate that the majority of their readership is male. Indeed Marvel's most recent survey,

The offending **chapeau.**

conducted only a few years ago, established that almost ⅔ of its audience was made up by men, while DC's survey, conducted in the late 1970's, put its male readership at only slightly less than that. **EPIC**'s reader survey gauged its readership as 94.3% male. **HEAVY METAL**'s reader profiles have not been as extensively tested and surveyed as have the other companies. However, its advertising promotion does describe its audience as primarily male. Earlier ad sheets indicated that at one time over 75% of its audience was male. Given these survey results and established reader profiles, and their revelation that the comics audience is primarily male in spite of the fact that the female population in the U.S. is 2% greater than that of men, it seems that something about contemporary comics must act as a barrier to potential female readership. Either some key, appealing element is lacking in today's comics as far as women are concerned, or something is present which decreases female appreciation of the medium.

Women, generally speaking, have certain perception differences from men which result in each sex seeking out and enjoying fundamentally different types of novels, plays, movies, and, yes, comics. Although the cause of this perception difference has not yet been established [research at Harvard University indicates that the differences might arise

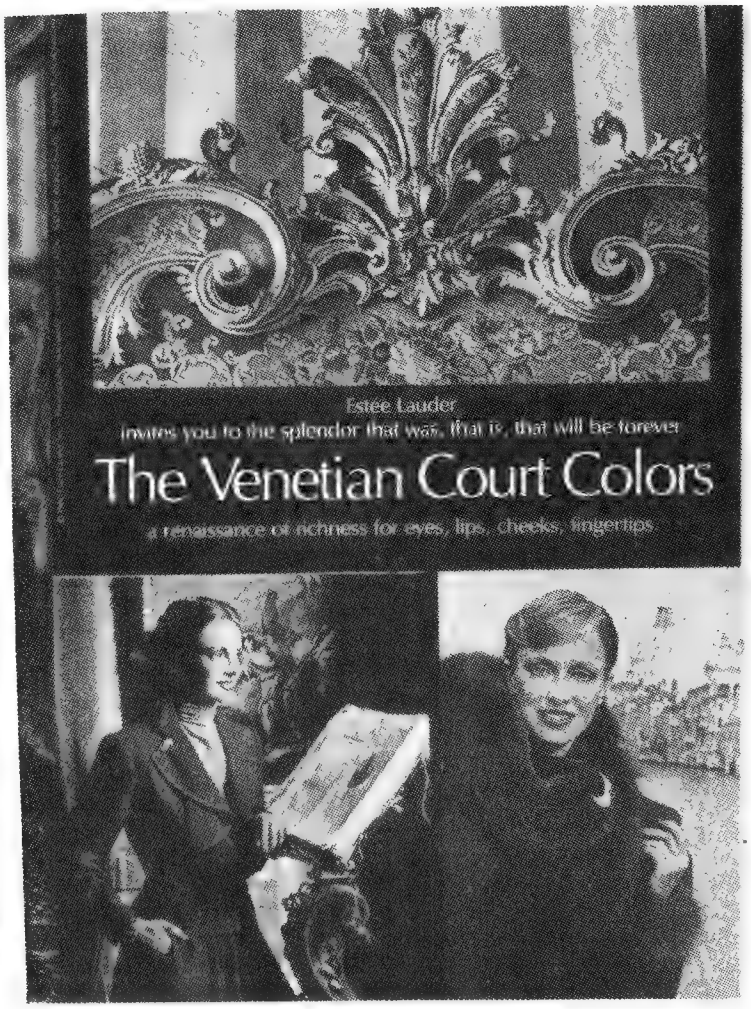
Carol Kalish is a graduate of Harvard University with a B.A. in Geology.

Young Deb
Yuck-a!
SLAM-BANG
ACTION

from the socialization process of young children, while Berkeley and Stanford experimenters have argued that role models and reinforced career aspirations among young children might be the twin causes], tests, surveys, and experiments which contrast the perceptions of women against those of men have uncovered certain key and consistent differences in how each sex reacts to what it sees.

These differences range from an appreciation of action and a tolerance for violence [men seem to react favorably to action even if it's tainted with violence, while women tend to be either indifferent or negative towards action] to greater comprehension of subtle characterization elements like body language, facial expressions, tics, and attire [women, according to a Duke University study, excel at interpreting body language and, more importantly to the subject of this article, seem to enjoy the process of interpreting characters through subtle physical expressions and posture. The men involved in the study generally reported that they felt uncomfortable or confused by such signals]. These perception/attitudinal differences might be behind the general disdain that men have for the favorite women's hobby of watching soap operas, and the reciprocally bemused attitudes of many women towards their husband's addiction to **MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL** and hockey.

Indeed the advertising industry has been aware of these sexual differences for over two decades and has, for an equal length of time, developed advertising campaigns that exploit these differences to


Estée Lauder
invites you to the splendor that was, that is, that will be forever
The Venetian Court Colors
a renaissance of richness for eyes, lips, cheeks, fingertips

A typical **COSMO** ad. Any guesses on what the actual **product** is?

better sell specific products. Any random comparison between advertising directed towards men versus that directed towards women reveals how advertising men, at least, translate these sociological observations into marketing strategy. Ads aimed at men emphasize action and movement. Car ads, for example, either picture the car in movement or show some individual or groups of people moving around stationary vehicles. A hint of danger or even violence generally increases the sales effect. The photography is very clean and sharp. Clarity of vision is emphasized. Finally the object to be hyped is almost always placed in the foreground. Ads aimed at women, on the other hand, take a very different tack. The object to be sold is often buried in the picture or used as an accessory. Camera work emphasizes mood and emotion: it's rare to locate a woman's ad that is a clear picture of anything at all. Indeed, successful women's advertising seems to ignore the object to be sold entirely in favor of emphasizing evocative expressions or emotions. Posture, expressions, attire —the projection of personality is often the goal of female-oriented advertising.

When you contrast these two advertising strategies with modern comics, it becomes dazzlingly obvious why women don't read them. It also becomes obvious what can be done to reverse this trend and lure more women into the comic book audience.

HMMM.. EYES UNUSUALLY BRIGHT.. CHEEKS HIGHLY FLUSHED.. AND PULSE PROBABLY BEATING AT AN ALARMING RATE... I'M AFRAID THIS TALENT FEVER IS GETTING OUT OF HAND, YOUNG LADY!
I'M IN A WONDERFUL STATE OF DELIRIUM, DOCTOR KING! SEE VISIONS ALL DAY LONG.. AND ONE OF THESE DAYS THEY'LL COME TRUE! JUST YOU WAIT!

"Historically there have always been comics that have managed... to address and capture the female market." At its peak, this comic. **YOUNG LOVE**, sold 2 million copies each issue.

Comics today radiate action. In any title or individual issue you might choose to mention, the whole thrust of the storyline is designed to propel the super-hero into combat with some foe. For all the attention and praise the frills (the characterization shticks, the moral ambiguities, and the emotional upheavals) receive from the fan press, the real core of the book remains the **de rigeur** fight scene. The characterization bits are extras, just filler stuffed in around the fight.

According to the marketing theory we've examined, this slam-bam-action-**cum**-violence emphasis appeals greatly to male readers but elicits at **best** neutral, and at worst negative, rections from any potential female readers. Female readers are looking specifically for those extra bits, the characterization elements, that are added as an afterthought to the comic-book story. In addition to searching for these characterization elements, female readers are also involved in analyzing and testing for versimilitude the elements that they **did** uncover. Dialogue would be contrasted against actual experienced conversations; attire would be judged according to the style, personality, and appearance of the wearer; and motivations would be evaluated in light of the believability of the expressed motives and their development process. Unfortunately, after-thought characterization elements, or even elements that are integral to the plot but are sprung full-blown upon the reader without the benefit of previous development, rarely lend themselves to this sort of analysis. They therefore again fail to satisfy the potential female reader's desire for something that is of interest specifically to her.

This predilection of comics towards satisfying male entertainment desires while refusing to address the needs of female readers is of fairly recent development. Historically there have always been comics that have managed either to address and capture the female market (the Love comics genre and the **ARCHIE COMICS** line) or to have balanced both male and female entertainment expectations in such a way as to provide satisfactory stories for both sexes (Funny Animal comics, many Gold Key titles, and Harvey Comics are all examples of comics titles, genres, or groups that appeal to both men and women). Indeed at one time both Marvel and DC had several titles that catered principally to the female audience (Marvel published a number of "teen humor" comics like **MILLIE THE MODEL** and **PATSY AND HEDY** while DC was one of the last major publishers of Love comics).

Generally speaking those titles that managed to secure female readership did so through three devices: the heavy use of expressions and body language to suggest character traits, narrative and conversational highlighting of motivation and personality drives, and an exacting effort to be visually realistic. Again, contrast this comic book strategy to the advertising strategy discussed earlier. Although it's true that all three elements rarely appeared to-

"Female readers are looking specifically for those extra bits, the characterization element..."

THE X-MEN HAVE BEEN AMBUSHED BY JUGGERNAUT.
NO, PROFESSOR. NOT THIS TIME.
YOU MUST LEAVE FOR IRELAND IMMEDIATELY AND GIVE THEM WHAT ASSISTANCE YOU CAN.
I'M STAYING HERE AT THE HOSPITAL UNTIL JEAN IS OUT OF DANGER.

YOU'RE--WHAT?!
YOU'RE PUTTING THE LIFE OF ONE WOMAN AHEAD OF THOSE OF YOUR FELLOW X-MEN?!
I AM. BECAUSE THAT WOMAN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE.
BESIDES THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO TO HELP THE X-MEN, NO WAY I CAN GET TO THEM IN TIME TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
AND YOU YOURSELF HAVE SAID THAT, SOONER OR LATER, THE NEW TEAM IS GOING TO HAVE TO LEARN TO FIGHT ON ITS OWN.

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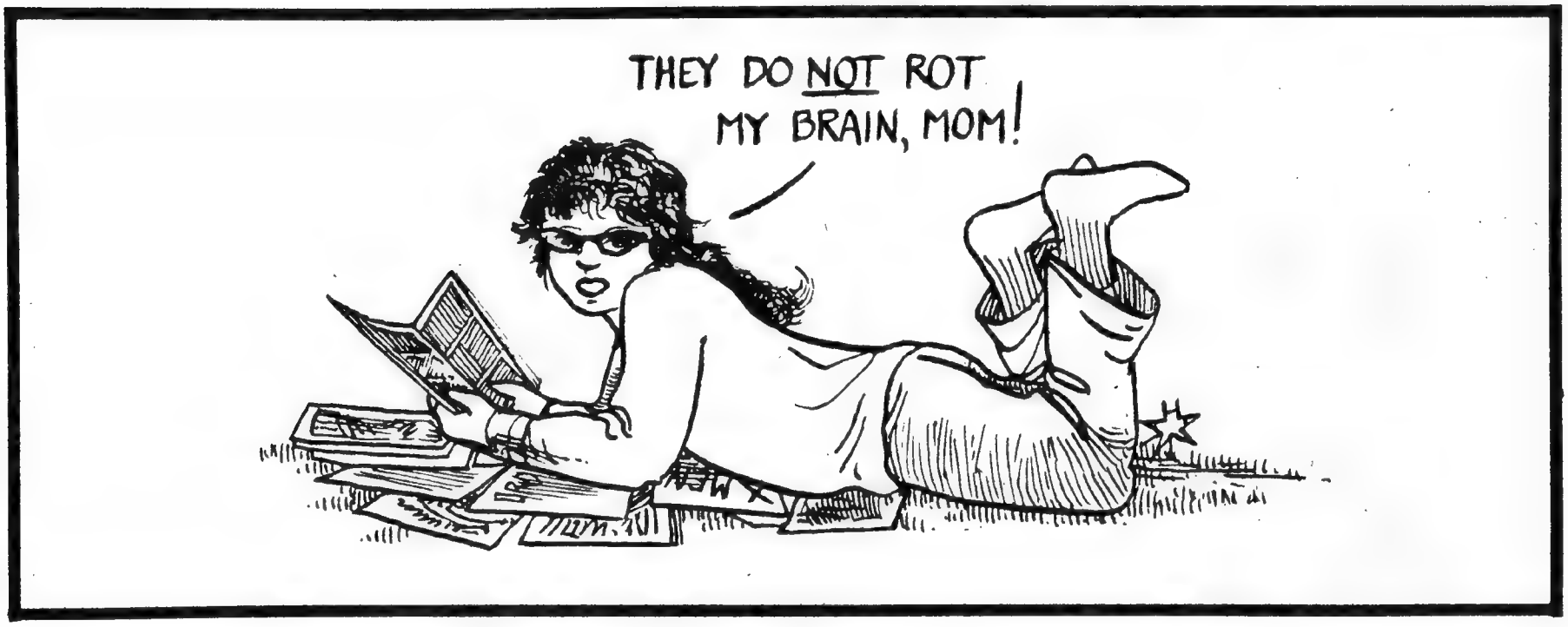

gether, it is equally true that it was rare for a comic to be popular with women if it didn't have at least one of these elements prominently displayed in the storytelling. Comics like the Simon and Kirby **YOUNG LOVE** and **YOUNG ROMANCE**, two of the all-time top sellers among women, often exhibited all three.

Today's super-hero comics rarely exhibit one of these traits. The few books that do attempt to incorporate one of these elements into their storytelling, **IRON MAN, POWER MAN/IRON FIST, THE NEW X-MEN**, and all of the many **Superman** titles, generally are the very books that seem to have attracted and held a large female audience. **IRON MAN**'s emphasis on Bethany Cabe's and Tony Stark's wardrobes and the many attempts by the creative team to realistically evoke the glamorous aura that supposedly surrounds the very rich would be very attractive to, say, the young woman who reads **COSMOPOLITAN** magazine. **POWER MAN/IRON FIST** and **THE NEW X-MEN** offer female readers a seemingly overflowing bounty of complex characters that cry out for analysis and dissection as far as their motivations and innermost personalities are concerned. The **Superman** books, on the other hand, emphasize the facial expressions and body language that female readers are often attracted to.

However, even these books, successful as they are at capturing the female market, are not completely able to throw off the tendency to favor male expectations over female interest. After all, each issue must contain the mandatory fight scene and substantial portions of the book must be devoted to building up to this physical confrontation. The fact that by slanting the content so heavily into one sex's interest, the book is reducing its ability to exploit an equally large audience does not seem to have occurred to anyone at either Marvel or DC. The mind positively boggles at the sales advantage that would benefit the company that finally realized that, be reducing the space devoted to action scenes slightly and then by devoting that space to catering to female interests, it could tap a potential sales market that was as large, if not larger, than the audience it currently was selling to.

So to answer my original question of **"Why Women Don't Read Comics,"** I have to conclude that it's because the companies don't want them to. Certainly no effort is made to capture the female market, even though a solid marketing strategy for doing just that has been in existence for over two decades. If the companies refuse to cater to the entertainment demands of women, then it should come as no surprise to anyone that women will continue to refuse to support the medium.●

35

THE ASSASSINATION OF FU MANCHU

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by Gene Phillips

Among popular fiction's greatest, most mythically-significant archetypes—Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Doc Savage, James Bond—there stands a figure of equal complexity but of far less lasting appeal—the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu. Yet, it must be admitted that this paragon of villains would have almost no popular currency today, existing only in old film adaptations, and as the "inspiration" for less significant copies (Dr. No, the Yellow Claw, the Mandarin)—except for the uneven efforts of Marvel's brainchild, **MASTER OF KUNG FU**.

Some definitions are necessary. By "mythically-significant archetypes" I refer to those select characters which unconsciously have been modeled after the heroes of mythic times—characters that become implicit embodiments of a culture, or of an amalgam of cultures. Such characters may be heroes championing their native cultures, such as Sherlock Holmes protecting Victorian England, or Doc Savage, safeguarding Depression-America, or they may be villains from an alien culture, challenging the native culture, yet valued by their creator for their cultural variety. Despite popular fiction's abundance of heroes and villains, however, few of that number are mythically-significant from a cultural viewpoint, for the making of a cultural myth entails a creator's elaborate insight regarding the characteristics of a culture—"evil" traits as well as "good."

Regarding heroes, the evil is merely a sublimated cultural weakness—but many lesser heroines—even those created by originators of more significant archetypes—lack even this balancing factor. Tarzan and John Carter are both educated, chivalrous gentlemen—but John Carter could never show the "African" impulsiveness that compels Tarzan, in an early adventure, to embrace a married woman. Prof. Challenger is as irascible an intellect as Sherlock Holmes, but could never echo the phrase so exemplary of narcissistic British eccentricity: "Quick, Watson, the needle!" Doc Savage and the Avenger are both physical paragons with unlimited gadgetry, but only Doc Savage displays the American male's ambivalent attitude toward the female: stolid indifference or confused vulnerability. Admittedly other heroes may have mythic appearances—John Carter being like a warrior-king, the Shadow like an avenging angel—but without specific references or parallels to Earthly cultures, their adventures lack the motivation of culture-defense, and become, like most comic books, action for action's sake. (Perhaps a special category should be reserved for characters who embody philosophical concepts rather than cultural traits—such as Michael Moorcock's Elric—but in a sense, one is an outgrowth of the other.)

The emphases of good and evil are reversed with respect to villains—referring in this instance not to archenemies of heroes, like Prof. Moriarty, but to the yet smaller, more unique group of culture-threats who have sustained their own legends—H. Rider Haggard's She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, Bram Stoker's Dracula, Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, and, of course, Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu. All are fanatically obsessed, and cruel toward their enemies, but are also possessed of nobility, high intelligence, and even a reverence for their foes, who rarely equal them in such respects. Unfortunately, only Fu Manchu remains associated with a real evil—namely, that of racism. This is somewhat mitigated in Fu Manchu by the presence of other qualities, but there can be no denying that Rohmer depicted all Orientals as having various undesirable characteristics, which were in fact little more than projections of cultural traits which the British possessed in abundance—the willingness to torture enemies, the love of secret societies, the cold-blooded use of science—all supposedly conquered by Victorian sensibility. The actual concept of the Yellow Peril—of alien hordes overrunning civilization—was more advanced by M.P. Shiel than Rohmer, but in any case it too is a projection, since the only historical instance where an invading people totally displaced an extensive native population, rather than being absorbed by it, is Europe's invasion of North America.

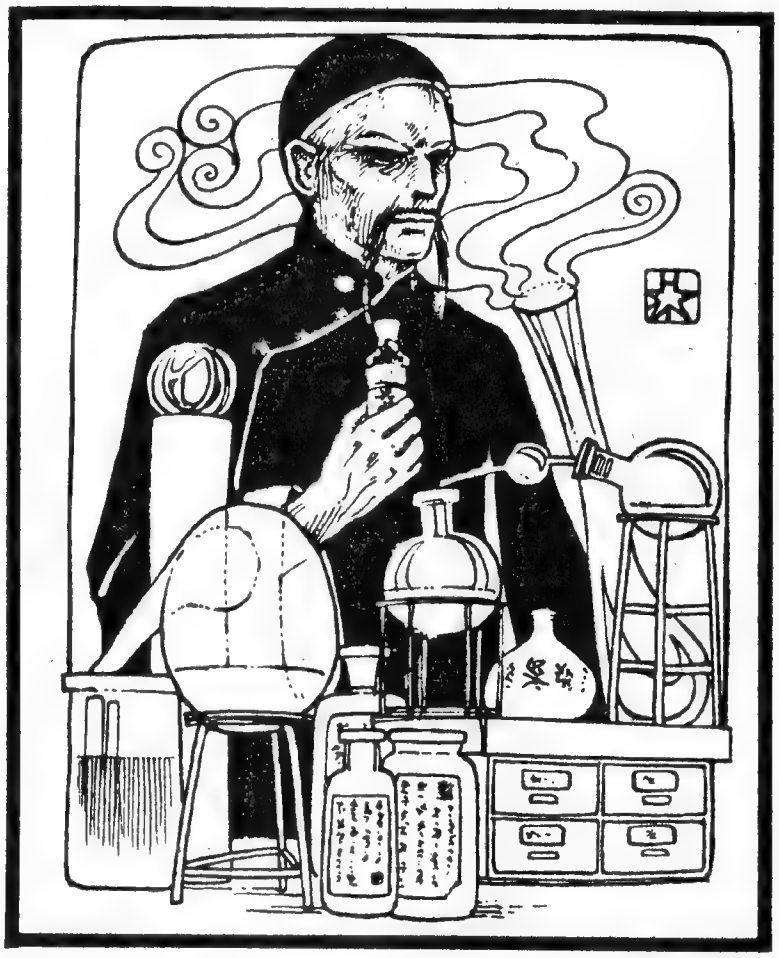
Yet the fantasy of a culture-threat is significant—

Gene Phillips is a well-known comics critic whose work has appeared in **THE COMICS JOURNAL** and other comics-related magazines.

indeed, history records that sometimes invaders are partially welcomed rather than repelled, and naturally, certain forms of literature reflect this. In a broad sense, Fu Manchu, She, and Dracula are cognate with the pattern of Euripides' play **THE BACCHAE**, in which Greek civilization is being undermined by a vaguely-Asian orgiastic culture, embodied by Dionysus. But pagan gods are rare in popular literature, and so a culturally-insightful villain-creator inevitably turns to the figure of the godlike man, the magus—the consummate master of occult powers (She and Dracula) and the modern parallel, the master of bizarre sciences (Captain Nemo and Fu Manchu). But in one important sense Fu Manchu transcends the scientific spectrum of Nemo, and partakes of the original status of the magus—for Fu Manchu is the master of the Orient, an amalgam of cultures from Egypt to India to China—and, even if it embarasses modern "Orientals," there are substantial grounds for making the "mysterious east" the repository of ancient magical wisdom, predating Greek logic and Judeo-Christian morality. This view of the east had been suggested in earlier centuries, but the emphasis on science in the nineteenth and twentieth century bred a certain reaction against science, ensuring the popularity of the mysterious east through the works of Rohmer, Haggard, Talbot Mundy, Ernest Bramah, and Robert W. Chambers. But most writers were less interested in the magical or aesthetic aspects of the east, and the increasing realism of the 1930s brought forth largely only the Shiel-like racial denigration seen in pulp (Robert E. Howard) and comic strips (Alex Raymond's absurd Ming the Merciless).

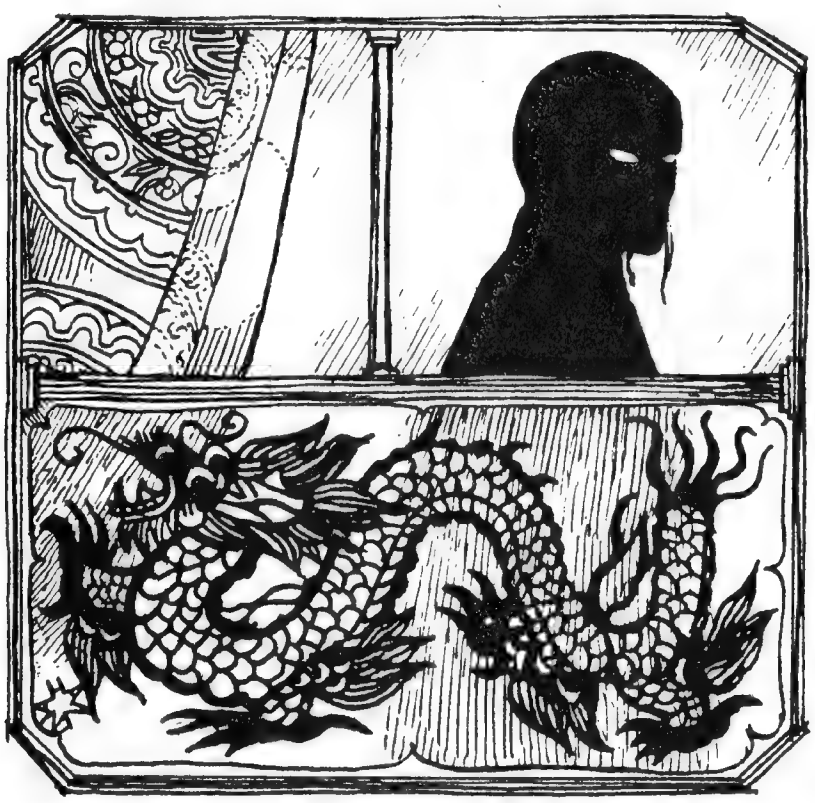
In the 1950s, however, Beat poets perhaps started the wisdom-seeking craze with their interest in zen, followed in the sixties by acceptance of yoga, Buddhism, the I Ching, Krishna, and diverse other "ancient wisdoms." Thus the attitude toward these concepts changed from the horror and awe of the uninitiated Westerner, to the acceptance of the acolyte—and popular acceptance of such mysticisms laid the foundation for a later, more pragmatic "wisdom," the martial arts. At last the Western popular attitude had taken a full 180-degree turn, from the image of the magus, to the less godlike image of the mystic teacher, culminating at last in the image of the Oriental fighter, who might, or might not, possess a coherent philosophy.

According to the debut issue of **MASTER OF KUNG FU**, Roy Thomas suggested the use of Fu Manchu in conjunction with the philosophic martial-arts concept designed by Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin (one of those purely-fortuitous combinations at which only Marvel seems adept)—in effect, pitting the "father," ancient Oriental villainy, against the "son," modern Oriental heroism. Englehart managed a perfect imitation of the Rohmeresque ambience—Fu's use of exotic weapons and assassins, which symbolized the magus' power to command all the world's natural terrors—but the conflict was insufficiently developed, causing readers to remark on the monotony of Fu's assaults on Shang-Chi. Shang-Chi was criticized for being too much the philosophical naif, in the mold of TV's Kwai Chang Caine, rather than a more dynamic Bruce Lee-type—but the primary drawback of this emphasis was that Englehart and Starlin's concept of Oriental philosophy was even less articulate than that of the vaguely-Taoist Kwai Chang (for instance, it's hard to see how Shang-Chi's studies in philosophy can teach him "that killing is an act to be abhorred," when in fact many philosophies of East and West disagree on this point—and Fu would have been Shang's source of reading materials.) Because of these failings, the cultural opposition of the "two Orients" never took place except on a superficial level, and, inevitably, a less mythic approach prevailed.



Doug Moench both was, and was not, an inspired choice for continuation of the series. While most Marvel writers were hopelessly entrenched in the dynamics of the super-hero/SF milieu, Moench was more than aware of the widely-differing dynamics of the adventure thriller, in which deviations from contemporary reality are subtle, not disrupting the reader's sense of that reality. However, Moench's reality was less cognate with Rohmer's weird, vaguely-poetic world of Oriental wonders and terrors, than with Ian Fleming's modernistic milieu of grim espionage and near-sadistic violence. Moench's earliest issues of **MOKF** featured ludicrous attempts to follow the pattern of the conflict, without either apprehending the meaning of it, or without the Rohmeresque weirdness or the marginal attempts at philosophy and mythic characterization. Fu Manchu lost the subtlety Englehart had given him in his one real

MOKF master plan—which involved drugging America with mimosa fumes—and indulged instead in such Flemingesque schemes as dynamiting Mount Rushmore [not unlike the explosive schemes of **MOONRAKER** and **THUNDERBALL**]. Whereas Englehart and Starlin had emphasized the Oriental aspects of bizarre sciences and the martial arts, Moench and Gulacy emphasized the Occidental game of espionage, with at first only minor concessions to the Oriental content. Of course, the development of Paul Gulacy's artwork into a Steranko-esque style was an influences on the series' course, but only Moench could have made the decision to phase out Fu Manchu as a central character, featuring instead Nayland-Smith, Black Jack Tarr, Leiko Wu, and Clive Reston



[who makes his appearance in the best of the early tales with Fu, **GIANT-SIZE MOKF #3**, though the use of Rohmeresque Phansigars is not enough to compensate for Fu's cliche character and tacky motivation]. When the decision was made to give Fu a rest, in favor of other villains, it was wisely made.

Yet, once Moench and Gulacy began their "kung-fu espionage" format in earnest, Moench began to demonstrate uncanny facility with both heroes and villains. Indeed, Moench's evocations of the characters' interrelationships, their past lives, and even their speech patterns were incredibly vital, verging upon a poetry of heroism not unlike that of Don McGregor. Thus, one is forced to wonder: Why did Moench prove so incapable of handling Fu Manchu's formidable character?

As stated before, one quality lacking from Moench's early issues was "mythic characterization," but in truth, such might have been expected, for Moench was diametrically opposed to that process, having eventually revealed himself as a practitioner of "mundane characterization." "Mythic" and "mundane" are no more than alternate terms for what my English composition class called "universal" and "particular"—the latter being the mundane details of a character with which a reader can immediately identify [such as Shang-Chi preferring **CLOSE ENCOUNTERS** to **STAR WARS**], the former being the overall mythic aspect of the character in which the reader can see deeper meaning [Shang-Chi becoming an unbeatable force, a Thor-like berserker]. In any evolving characterization, a writer inevitably chooses to emphasize either the mythic or the mundane, and usually, to work gradually toward the opposite. Rohmer and Englehart always dealt first with the larger-than-life characteristics, with mundane details being secondary embellishments. But Moench, like Fleming, always emphasized the life-sized aspects of characters—broken love affairs in particular—and used associations of myth and poetry to heighten their meaning. Herein lies the conflict: Moench could devise fine villains—Mordillo, Cat, Pavane—as long as he could delve into their personal, mundane backgrounds for motivation. But Fu Manchu was a mythic figure, whose background consisted of his magus-associations [his repetitive use of the Amanita Muscaria mushroom, for instance], and even though in other books Moench did attempt to create magus-figures that embodied pseudo-philosophical concepts [the unmotivated evil of Darklens and Dr. Glitternight], **MOKF** could not initially deal with such concepts, being concerned rather with the Flemingesque milieu of passion and violence.

Unquestionably Moench's best treatment of Fu Manchu is within the six-part **"Golden Daggers"** epic. Though Fu Manchu is somewhat forced into the modernistic mold of a Fleming antagonist with all the trappings [ski-troops, machine-guns, a plan to blow up something], the hardware is somewhat balanced by such "Oriental" terrors as the spider-spell, giant scorpions, and a living dead man. Moreover, though Fu's plan to demolish Western civilization is totally unlike the real devil-doctor's subtle maneuverings, the concept of destroying the moon is a grand scheme, coming very close to giving Fu a mythic status. The potential, however, is ruined by the way Moench describes Fu's motivation—that of trying desperately, even haphazardly, to return the world [and specifically, China] to its golden, barbaric past. Rohmer has hinted at such motivations as well [on a less apocalyptic scale], but though he characterized Fu as mad, it was a calculating madness, not a desperate one. If questioned as to why he committed acts of violence, Fu Manchu would not reply, as Moench's version does, "Because—there is nothing less to do." Rather, he would reply that he was no more a criminal than Alexander or Napoleon. Still, if Moench could not completely grant Fu his full mythic status, he at least confirmed Rohmer's dictum that Fu acted out a quasi-altruistic desire to reform a confused world—which, at the time Fu Manchu was created, was completely beyond belief.

Fu Manchu's death in **#50** was temporary—but before any resurrection, Doug Moench had the opportunity to re-write the original opposition of the

"two Orients" in **"What If Shang-Chi Had Remained Loyal To Fu Manchu?"** Moench actually excelled Englehart's articulation of Fu Manchu's motives and philosophy, though of course Englehart was hampered in that Fu was not the real star of the show. Besides, Rohmer never dealt with rational motives for Fu's villainy anyway, insofar as the only real reasons were Fu's embodiment of an enemy-culture, his magian superiority—both weakened by Shang-Chi's presence. Shang-Chi's ultimate reasons for rebelling against Fu in the Moench tale are no better than those of Englehart's—for though Moench claims that Shang's reverence for life comes from Taoist teching, he still does not explain why Fu should have allowed the influence.

The actual return of Fu Manchu to the regular book—**"The Phoenix And The Serpent"**—seemed to suggest even greater potential. The status of magus, which Rohmer had only implied, was visibly conferred upon Fu, in that his new scheme seemed a deliberate attempt to "forge a new path combining elements of all the old ways," to reconcile a variety of symbolisms and disciplines into a new "Order of the Golden Dawn." This was an obvious in-joke, for Sax Rohmer himself had been a member of the ritual-magic society called the Golden Dawn, though he never depicted occult phenomena as such in the Fu Manchu stories. Perhaps, that in-joke was the natural extension of another—virtually having Fu Manchu take over his creator's role after having indirectly arranged "his" death"—Ward Sarsfield being a surrogate for Arthur Sarsfield Ward, a.k.a. Sax Rohmer. The issues previous to **"Phoenix"** had been solid thrillers with sharp characterization and penetrating touches of philosophy, and so it seemed that, at last, Fu Manchu would assume the status of magus.

Wrong. Fu's master plan was a hodgepodge of cliche devices, and the references to occult wisdoms were no more than gaudy window-dressing, meant to suggest Fu's "deranged godhood." As for the overall plot, one can only surmise that Fu also preferred **CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**, because Moench's madman surely got from it the idea of terrorizing the populace with flying saucers—unless he subscribed to **CAPTAIN MARVEL**, where Moench also used the plot before. [Ironically, Fu Manchu did employ saucer-like vessels in a late Rohmer story, but not for the fruitless purpose of terrorism.] Fu Manchu also unleashes upon decadent civilization mutated hominids [meant to resemble aliens] and a number of destructive agents, controlled by electronic implants—and though both of these are also consonant with his abilities, the aliens serve no actual purpose, and the implants are pointlessly horrifying, since the real Fu possesses drugs capable of the same feat, without any danger of detection. Worst of all, the main thrust of the scheme is the hoary old chestnut about inciting nuclear war between the great superpowers, which has only been done by Marvel and others about 666 times. The reason the sinister plot is so badly executed is partially because Moench's main attraction is on the intriguing interrelationships between Chi, Leiko, Reston, Black Jack, Zaran, and Fah Lo Suee [who, though never a great character, deserved something better than Moench's contrived motivation—that she defies her father to help build up the English MI-6 organization]. The confrontations between father and son are bungled by Moench's lack of mythic sense—in one maudlin sequence, Shang-Chi incoherently pleads with Fu Manchu, who replies only with his "mad love of violence" to Shang's wishes for reconciliation. The encounter lacks the poetry necessary for a mythic confrontation, and lacks also the in-depth detailing of emotion that would redeem it as a mundane psychological study. When Fu Manchu declines to seriously consider Shang's pleas, Shang-Chi rages at this, and petulantly blames Fu for the chaos he has engendered in his life and the lives of others. In their final confrontation Shang-Chi virtually re-enacts issue **#50**'s ending, except that the "old" Shang shoots Fu before he can unleash his doom-device, while the "new" one takes Fu by surprise and knocks him down to prevent his escape, or perhaps to satisfy childish spite. Had Fu's saucer not crashed into the sea, he would have died anyway—of embarassment.

Normally, Moench's **MOKF** series is one of the few continuing comics that still evinces personal dedication and craftsmanship—but when Moench attempts to work with the awesome figure of Fu Manchu, he follows the pattern of most writers who deal with another writer's famous and/or unique creation. A few writers will attempt to re-enforce a character's mythic greatness [as in Steve Englehart's Batman, Marv Wolfman's and Peter Tremayne's Draculas, and Russ Manning's Tarzan] but most writers will try to scale down the character to a few recognizable traits. Moench's version of Fu Manchu is therefore coeval with Nicholas Meyer's Sherlock Holmes, Kingsley Amis' James Bond, Chris Claremont's Dr. Strange, and Roy Thomas' Conan and Belit [to some extent Belit presents the same problem in **CONAN** as did Fu in **MOKF**: the forcing of a character into a mold as opposed to the original design].

Individually many of my complaints are nitpicking, and unimportant to the mass of **MOKF** readers not acquainted with the real Fu Manchu. I might even be able to tolerate Moench's demythification of Fu Manchu, if it represented something profound rather than merely didactic—and certainly, repetition of plots can be done with a spirit of freshness, like Englehart's modification of a **CAPTAIN AMERICA** plot for the Batman series **"Joker-fish,"** which did not neglect to establish new character insights. But all too often, as in the Milton Caniff tribute, or the **WEIRDWORLD** color comic, Moench is content to copy a basic form without either apprehending the original author's substance or conceiving anything better to subsitute. One can only hope to have seen the last of his assassinations of Fu Manchu. ●

COVERS, BACKUPS, AND MYSTERIES

THE PATH TO SUCCESS IN COMIC BOOKS

by Rich Morrissey

Dear Editor:

I would like to know how I can become a professional writer for DC comics. I know you have developed one young writer, Jim Shooter, who's only 15—and I'm older than he is. I think I could do a fine job if I could only get started. How do I go about it?

Tom Harriman, Sarasota, Fla.

We're always on the lookout for good writers. However, Jim Shooter is a rare find —a talented scripter with an excellent visual sense. He sent in several sketches we thought would make good covers, and we liked his work so well that we encouraged him to submit story ideas. Recently, we discovered a new young writer Cary Bates, a college student... Cary also began by sending us cover ideas...until he hit the jackpot... Finally, we tried Cary as a writer, and the result is the story featured in this issue ....

The above letter and [condensed] reply appeared in **WORLD'S FINEST COMICS #167** [June, 1967], along with the first published story by a writer who today continues to write **SUPERMAN** and **FLASH** stories regularly. It's a very accurate description of Cary Bates' entry into the comic book field, but it's open to question as far as Jim Shooter is concerned.

Shooter has stated several times in interviews that his first professional sale was a script submitted totally "cold"—a **"Legion of Super-Heroes"** story that was published in **ADVENTURE COMICS#**348 [September, 1966]. True, that story was drawn up like a regular comic book, and, as Shooter himself said in an interview in **THE LEGION OUTPOST #8**, "I had a cover on it and all the pages drawn, like a kid would do." But it was definitely the story and not the cover that most impressed editor Mort Weisinger, as Shooter went on to say, "The thing that Mort always used to tell me about Cary Bates was that he always had a good cover to go with a story. That was my problem; I was a good verbal thinker sometimes, but I **couldn't** get a cover." [Emphasis added.]

Weisinger himself confirmed this in an interview in **THE LEGION OUTPOST #9**: "When I **did** use cover ideas he suggested, against my better instinct, they bombed in sales." [Emphasis his.] In short, what cover ideas Shooter did submit failed to impress either Weisinger or the public, and his success as a writer, contrary to what Tom Harriman and the other readers of that issue were told, was owed entirely to other factors.

Mort Weisinger is now dead, so the true reason for this confusion may never be known. It could be that he [or E. Nelson Bridwell, who answered many of the readers' letters at this time] simply confused the circumstances of Shooter's first sale with those of Bates', but Shooter himself is less generous..."He lied," he told me when I asked. In that same reply, after all, the editors admit that "An idea that makes a good cover can sell itself at a glance, and this is much easier for us than reading plot outlines." Even if they weren't being entirely truthful in encouraging other readers to follow suit, however, the editors **did** read and buy Jim Shooter's unsolicited work, and presumably read that of others as well. Many later editors have been even less generous with would-be writers and artists.

In this article I will focus more on writers than on artists, and the situation isn't entirely the same for

Rich Morrissey graduated from Worcester Polytech and got his law degree at Suffolk and is currently a public defender. He is a co-founder of Interlac and has twice been central mailer of CAPA-alpha, as well as the editor and publisher of **BATMANIA.**

both—in part because artistic talent is not only relatively rarer than writing talent, but it's also much easier to evaluate from a glance at a portfolio. Moreover, editors are much more likely to come from the ranks of writers [or writer/artists] than from the ranks of those who draw and don't write. Even so, many of the same practices that I examine here as applying to writers are also applicable, if sometimes to a lesser or greater extent, to artists.

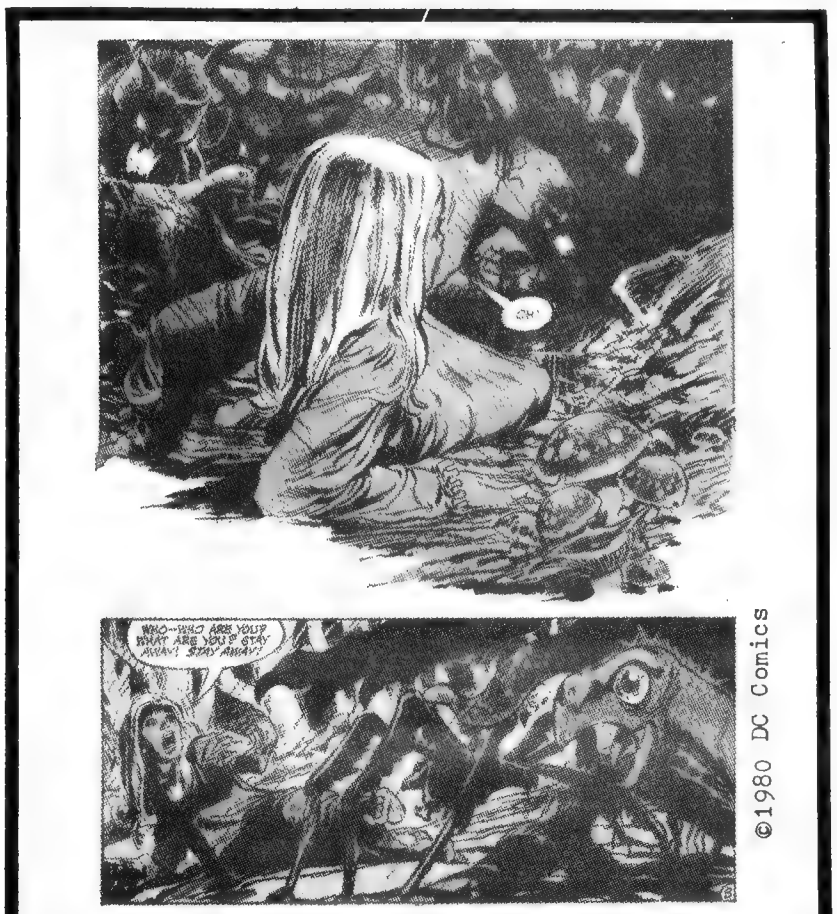
Before the rise of comic book fandom in the 1960s, the field had been, as far as hiring and working practices were concerned, a business much like any other. Writers and artists were often people who'd grown up reading comics, but they usually got into the business through friends already in it, or through writing or art in other fields. For writers especially, writing for the comics was much the same as writing for other magazines or writing novels, which many of them also did.

It wasn't until the 1960s that people began to arise who were more anxious to write comic books than to write anything else. Fandom made them realize that there were other people, not just young children, who liked this format and these characters. Inevitably, they began to progress from reading about them to wishing that they themselves could write [or, if they could, draw] their adventures, and the companies began to get more and more submissions from readers. Fandom provided a place for many of these would-be writers and artists to refine and develop abilities that weren't yet up to the professionals' standards—just as, a generation earlier, the comic books themselves had provided a medium for young people who really wanted to write or draw newspaper strips or cartoons.

Most of the initial expansion was at Marvel for two reasons. Its titles were more experimental and aroused greater interest in more fans than did DC's, and therefore it was the first choice of more fans. Also, Marvel had started out small and was only now expanding in response to the success of its existing titles—which meant it needed more newcomers than did DC, which already had a large stable of writers and artists. Marvel got many of the most enthusiastic fans like Gary Friedrich, Denny O'Neil, Barry Smith, and Jim Steranko—but DC had its share of adherents and people who thought they could work better with its characters, especially writers like Mike Friedrich, Roy Thomas, and the aforementioned Bridwell, Shooter, and Bates. Enthusiastic as they were, though, many of these fans became quickly disillusioned and less inclined to stay with one feature, or even one company, as long as their predecessors. Hence, by the time they began to establish their reputations, Roy Thomas was at Marvel and Denny O'Neil at DC—although, ironically enough, the ever-increasing mobility of company staffs has now brought both writers back to the publishers with which they began. But the greatest influx of new people wasn't to come until late in the decade.

In 1968, when the superhero fad was beginning to die down, Carmine Infantino [newly appointed editorial director of DC] decided to revitalize what had long been a minor remnant of the line. The sucess of EC Comics in the horror/mystery field in the early 1950s had led almost every publisher in existence to follow suit, but DC's books like **HOUSE OF MYSTERY** and **TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED** had never been very important to it. Marvel, although it had survived largely on such titles for years, didn't find real success until it began to create new superheroes in the '60s, and by 1968 had almost completely abandoned them. But interest in the ECs had been growing, Jim Warren had begun a whole new black and white horror market, and Infantino decided to make former EC artist Joe Orlando the editor of **HOUSE OF MYSTERY** and see if he could recapture what had made EC work.

The book started off slowly, relying heavily on the least popular staff writers and artists like Bob Haney, Jack Oleck and Jack Sparling. But, with fan-

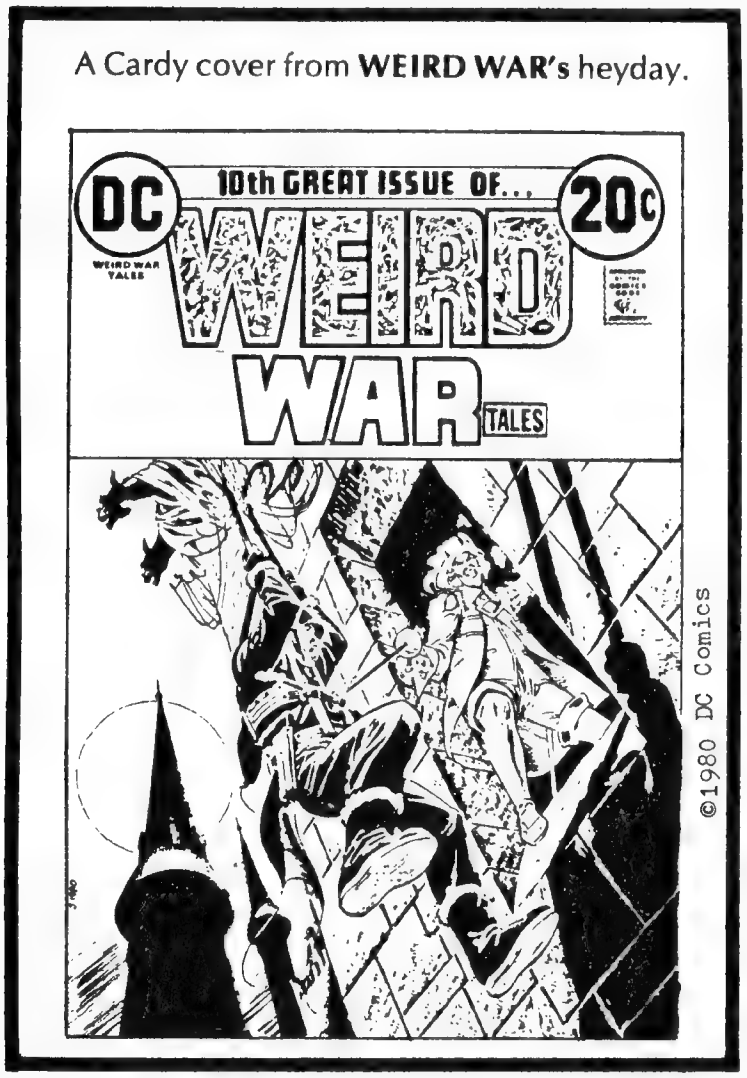


A sample page from **HOUSE OF MYSTERY**'s high-riding days. Art by Neal Adams.

dom interest so high in the ECs, Orlando made a deliberate policy of cultivating new writers and artists with similar interests—and **HOUSE OF MYSTERY** gradually began to make a marked upturn both in quality and in sales. More and more "mystery" books were added to the DC line, all with the same innovative stories by Len Wein, Marv Wolfman, Michael Fleisher, and a revitalized Jack Oleck, illustrated by people like Gray Morrow, Neal Adams, Mike Kaluta, Alex Toth, Berni Wrightson, and Ralph Reese. Marvel returned to the field full-blast, expand-

ing it to black and white titles and challenging not only DC but Warren at their own game, complete with writers and artists like Gerry Conway and Jim Starlin.

At first all these new people concentrated on the mystery books, but they quickly began to diversify. Joe Orlando himself meshed the horror format with that of the super-hero and even the war hero in new, successful titles like **PHANTOM STRANGER, SWAMP THING,** and **WEIRD WAR TALES.** He was as much of an editorial success story as Julie Schwartz had been a decade before, and the new stories absolutely poured from his office—each issue containing only the best of what was available. By the time Infantino left his executive position in 1976,



A Cardy cover from **WEIRD WAR's** heyday.

Orlando had been promoted to DC's managing editor, a title he retained under Infantino's successor, Jenette Kahn.

His and other horror editors' discoveries made their own progress in the field, too. Having even fewer ties to a single company than did the first graduates of comics fandom, Len Wein, Marv Wolfman, and especially Gerry Conway began to oscillate back and forth between DC and Marvel as new writing assignments opened up. By the end of the decade, all three had been regular writers on most of the major titles at **both** DC and Marvel, and their successors on the mystery titles, like David Michelinie and Michael Fleisher, were beginning to follow suit. They also graduated to editorial positions, along with other Orlando proteges like Paul Levitz, and in turn supervised the entry of a still newer generation of professionals.

And what was the result of all this success? Like all spectacular trends, it didn't last forever—but, also like many trends, the horror boom of the early 1970s had lasting repercussions—not all of them favorable either to the mystery titles or to comic books in general.

To be sure, it brought new people into the field—but as these people developed their craft and took other, well-paying assignments they could no longer do much for the mystery books. The supply of artists was the first to dwindle, and Infantino had another brainstorm. He took a world tour, visiting countries like the Philippines and Argentina that had plenty of artists who'd work for far less than the going American rate, and hiring the best of them at a distance. For a time the art in the mystery titles was unique and precedent-setting again, and the result was so successful that the already-huge inventory of stories became bigger than ever.

But then the foreign artists, too, began to realize how much more their American counterparts were getting paid for what was often far worse work. The best of them, like Alfredo Alcala, Tony DeZuniga, Ernie Chua/Chan, and Nestor Redondo, began to play Marvel's interest against DC's, and some of them even came to America and started studios here. Once again the overall quality of the comics was increased, but the best foreign artists too were largely gone from the mystery books. The idea of the horror titles as a training ground had led to one of the clearest examples of the Peter Principle. All their best writers and artists had gone elsewhere, leaving them with the worst of both writers and domestic and foreign artists. Indeed, the Peter Principle eventually went even farther, as applied to the artist—when most of the best ones [the Adamses, Kalutas, Smiths, Wrightsons, and even Alcalas and Redondos] dropped out of professional comics almost altogether to make a living doing commercial art and limited-edition portfolios.

But the writers—many of whom had now become editors—continued to apply their own experience to their successors. Most of them had begun on mystery books and "graduated" to super-hero and other titles; what was more logical than expecting their successors to do the same? But there'd been so many stories bought and paid for already that by now there was very little room for new material in them—and, although most of the inventory consisted of the poorer stories [the better ones had been used soon after their purchase, for the most part] this was now all the new writers had to go by. DC was now a hard place indeed for a new writer, and Marvel was even worse. It had given up its own horror titles with their decline in popularity, so it rarely hired any new writers at all, instead allowing them to develop at DC before offering them work. It was a very parasitic policy on Marvel's part, but it seemed feasible.

Even those editors who encouraged other sources of talent were a dying breed. Julie Schwartz continued to accept contributions from fans, usually starting

them off on backups, but allowing them to graduate to important lead features like Superman and Batman very quickly. Mike Friedrich's lead was followed by Elliot Maggin, Martin Pasko, and Bob Rozakis. But none of these people found it very easy to find work outside the Schwartz office, and by the end of the '70 s most were entirely, or nearly, out of the field altogether.

Indeed, the management of DC was becoming more and more monolithic, and even senior editors like Schwartz were no longer free to follow their own devices in selecting their creative personnel. The increasing mobility of writers and artists led to more and more of them signing contracts with DC or Marvel, and it became more important to find work for all the contracted personnel than to select new people for assignments they seemed to fit. It's on record that Schwartz found it very difficult to place a talented but relatively inexperienced artist, Marshall Rogers, on an important character like the Batman [Rogers **had** drawn some mystery books, but he hadn't drawn **enough**], and that he was forced to replace Martin Pasko by Len Wein as the regular **SUPERMAN** writer, although neither he, Pasko, nor Wein desired the change. Although he's continued to buy fill-in and back-up stories from previously inexperienced fans like Frank McGinty, Liz Smith, and Mike Tiefenbacher, Schwartz has been unable to develop them into full-time writers.

What is it about mystery-title graduates that makes them such, in the opinion of the editors, superior writers? There's a good case for it; in a one-shot horror story, a writer must both develop his own characters and tell a complete story in eight pages or less—something many current writers seem to have difficulty in doing. All too many people have come into the field interested in one thing only: continuing the adventures of their favorite characters in the style of the early Marvel titles. Such writers have often ended up writing endlessly continued stories with few or no new characters; they rely constantly on one episode involving one previously-introduced villain after another, often relying on previous stories even for their very plots. Presumably, people who can write good mystery stories with original characters and plots can do the same with superheroes and other genres. After all, the argument goes, a good writer can write **any** type of character.

The truth of that last argument is open to question; the comic book field has, in the opinion of most fans, been plagued by the constant assignment of writers talented in one area to features they have little ability for. Moreover, many of the mystery stories, as currently handled by DC, are editorially forced into the very limitations in plot and characterization that they were originally trying to avoid. The plot of the stereotyped villain being pursued, and ultimately killed, by some super-natural manifestation of one of his victims is as overused in those books as is the plot of a super-hero once again thwarting an old foe's attempt to bring his equally-old plans to fruition, usually after many pages of fight scenes—and it's not impossible that the current mystery standards, far from expanding the horizons of those new writers forced to adhere to them, are actually contacting them and leading them to believe that every genre has its own stereotypes that should not be ignored for very long, at the risk of decreased sales.

After all, if a good writer **can** write for any genre, would not some other type of story—a war story or a western or a love story or even a superhero one—be as good a training ground as a horror story? Historically, all of these **have** been used to train new writers—a famous example being Otto Binder, who was assigned to other characters before he was considered "ready for Captain Marvel," Fawcett's top seller. Nevertheless, his main interest was in superheroes, and he was given such characters, on whom he worked best, since his first days at Fawcett.

Now, however, with the declining number of different genres published by the major companies, there isn't enough room to start a new writer off on, say, a western series. When DC recently planned to add a new western title to its line, there was no end of staff writers—people with years of experience, who could have written any title they wanted—who expressed interest in it. The same has been true of science fiction, romance, and other specialized areas —current writers, finding super-heroes as limiting as horror stories, are anxious to try new things. A hierarchy of titles is beginning to arise, with the DC mystery books at the bottom and the famous heroes like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four at the top—and the result hasn't been good at either end, nor anywhere in between.

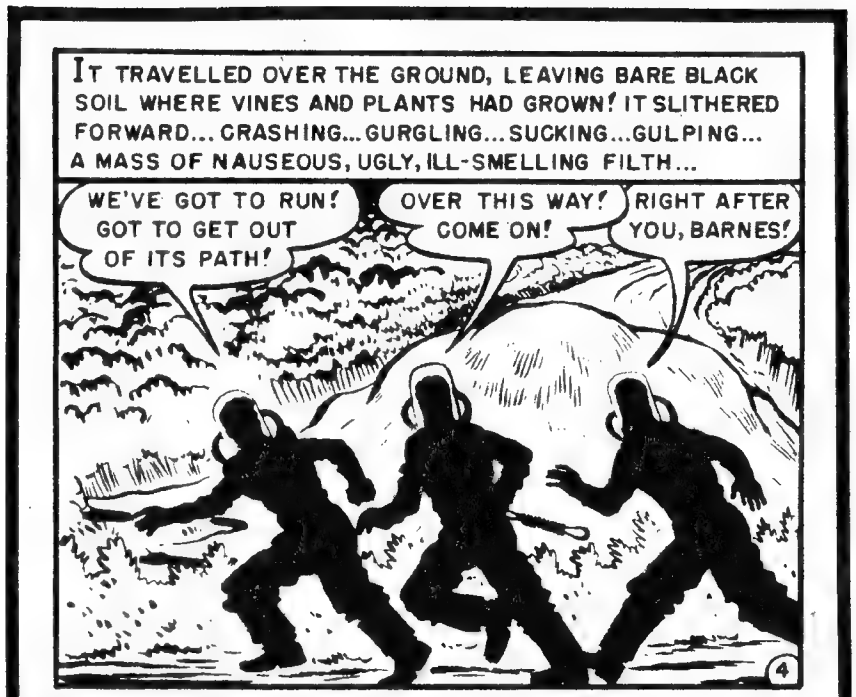
For, with so many writers trained on horror/mystery titles, their first experience with writing—if, indeed, they're good enough in that area to get assignments at all—will be in a very limited field. As we have

Schwartz reportedly found it difficult to place a then-unknown artist like Marshall Rogers on The Batman character.

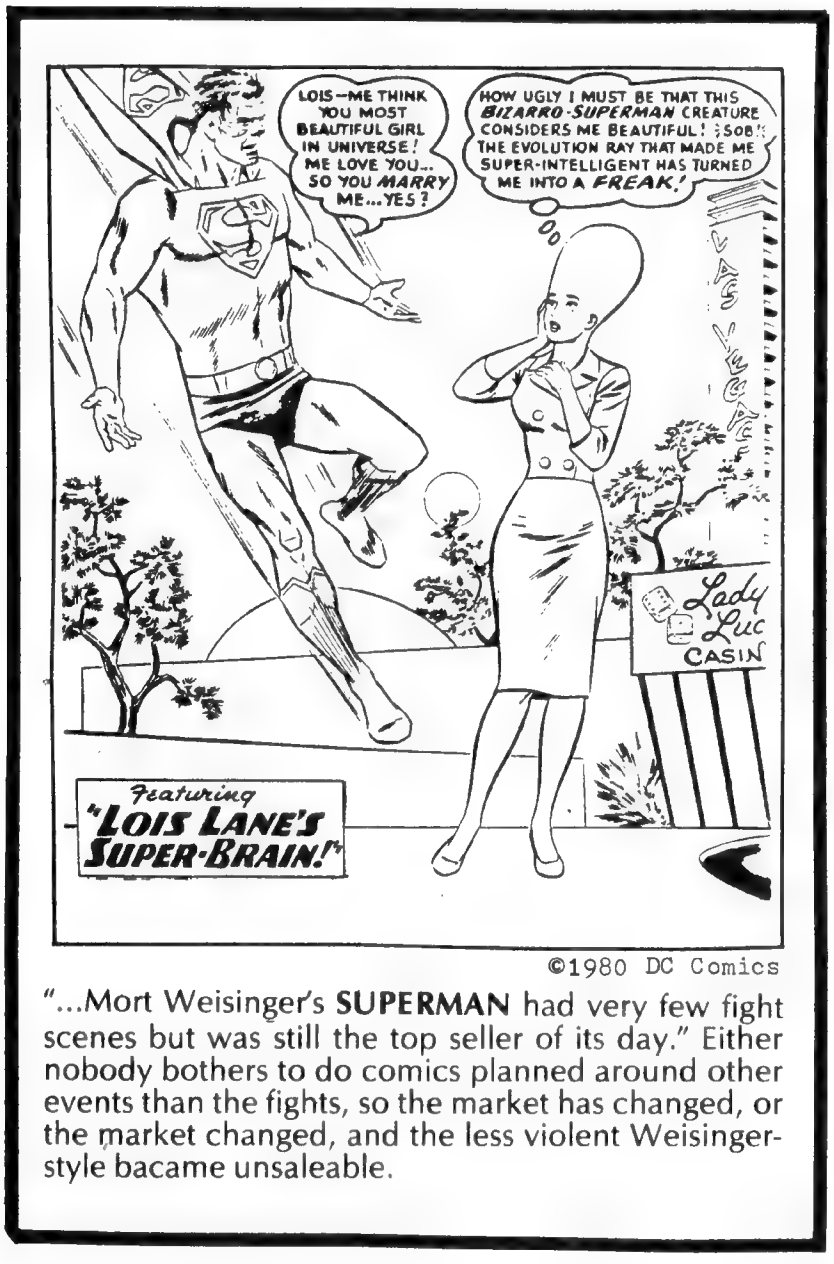
©1980 DC Comics

seen, its current limitations induce these writers to accept these or other limitations for other types of story, rather than to try to experiment **within** those types. If a **BATMAN** writer wants to do a Western, for instance, why not try a Western about Batman—which has been done many times in the past? Why must all super-hero stories have so many fight scenes, when Mort Weisinger's **SUPERMAN** had very few fight scenes but was still the top seller of its day? And why must all mystery stories have so much dialogue and such long captions, many of which would seem ridiculous in prose?

It's indicative of how the current hierarchy can lead to one, almost forgotten peculiarity becoming almost standard. The EC comics—the original inspiration of the first horror graduates, and hence, more indirectly, of their successors—were produced in a very unusual way. The captions and dialogue were written, and lettered onto the finished pages, before the artists even saw them—so the poetic description that so characterized the EC stories wasn't there so much for the reader's benefit, but for the artist's. Nevertheless, subsequent writers have adopted that writing style for **their** horror stories, and carried it on into super-hero stories and others where it doesn't even have whatever atmospheric effect it may have in the horror genre. It's certainly unnecessary for a writer who uses the DC style of a fully-descriptive script that tells the artist exactly what to draw—and even more absurd for a Marvel-style writer, who can **see** what the panel shows clearly and what needs to be described before he even writes his caption. But the style has become so standard in present-day comics that even the few writers coming into the field through other avenues find it hard to escape. The aforementioned Marty Pasko, a graduate of Schwartz backups and not horror stories [save a few free-lance sales to Warren] originally considered such captions ludicrous, but eventually began using them as often as the mystery graduates did.


IT TRAVELLED OVER THE GROUND, LEAVING BARE BLACK SOIL WHERE VINES AND PLANTS HAD GROWN! IT SLITHERED FORWARD... CRASHING... GURGLING... SUCKING... GULPING... A MASS OF NAUSEOUS, UGLY, ILL-SMELLING FILTH...
WE'VE GOT TO RUN! GOT TO GET OUT OF ITS PATH!
OVER THIS WAY! COME ON!
RIGHT AFTER YOU, BARNES!
4

A typical EC panel. The description is there as much for the artist as for the reader.


LOIS—ME THINK YOU MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN UNIVERSE! ME LOVE YOU... SO YOU MARRY ME...YES?
HOW UGLY I MUST BE THAT THIS BIZARRO-SUPERMAN CREATURE CONSIDERS ME BEAUTIFUL! SOB! THE EVOLUTION RAY THAT MADE ME SUPER-INTELLIGENT HAS TURNED ME INTO A FREAK!
LADY LUCK CASINO
Featuring "LOIS LANE'S SUPER-BRAIN!"

©1980 DC Comics

"...Mort Weisinger's **SUPERMAN** had very few fight scenes but was still the top seller of its day." Either nobody bothers to do comics planned around other events than the fights, so the market has changed, or the market changed, and the less violent Weisinger-style bacame unsaleable.

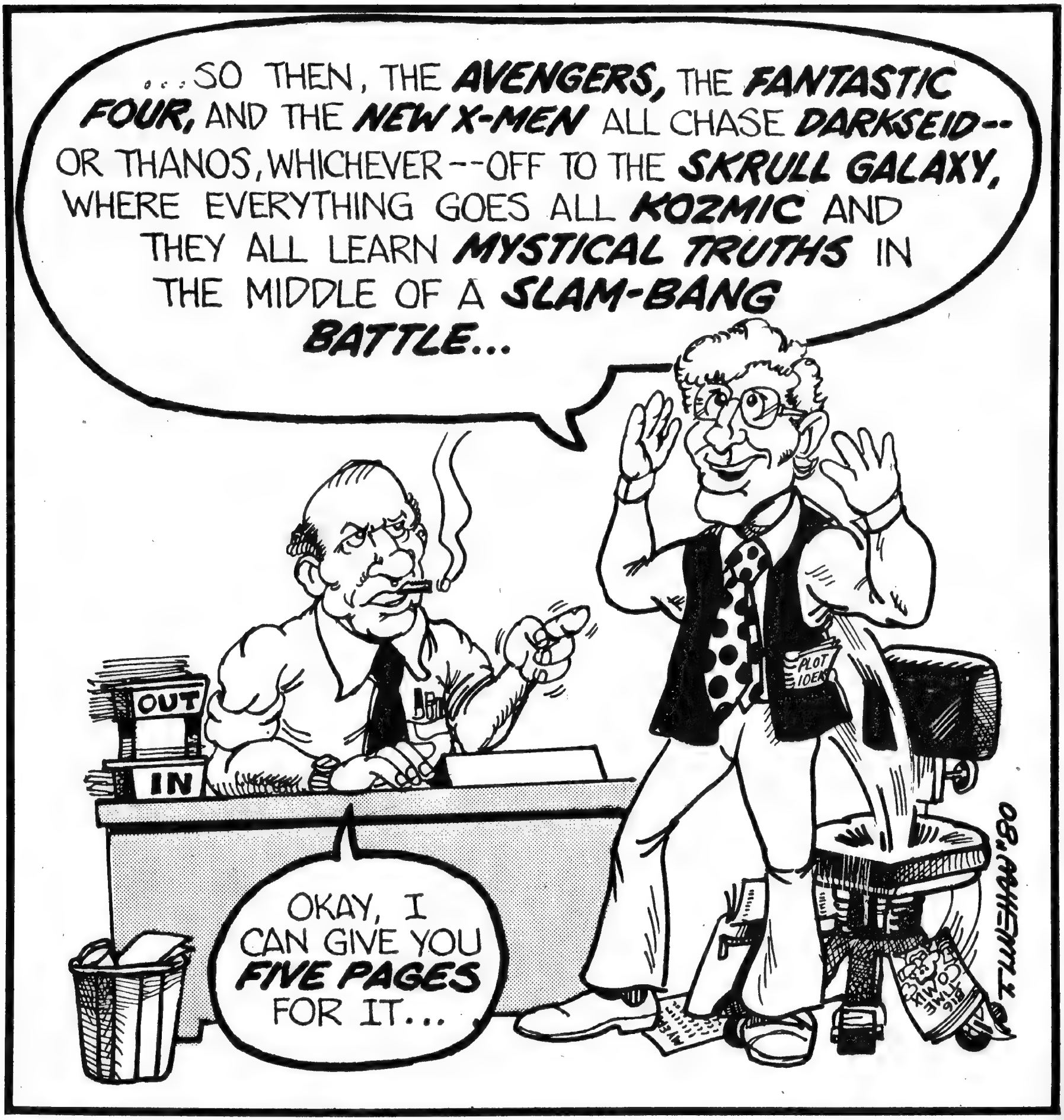
Indeed, there have been times when the hierarchy of titles seems to be used even against the writers' and artists' own wishes. One talented artist was reportedly refused work on DC's horror titles because "he was too good for them"—even though there were no other assignments currently open for him at the company. On the other hand, we have seen "star" writers assigned to important books [the aforementioned Len Wein to **SUPERMAN**, and Roy Thomas to **BATMAN**] in spite of their own expressed lack of interest in the characters. It's been a very unfortunate trend.

But the trend seems to be vanishing now, at least at one of the two major companies. The last few years have seen most of the graduates of the mystery titles—Gerry Conway, Len Wein and Marv Wolfman—all congregating at DC after having, at different times, held the position of Editor-in-Chief at Marvel. That position is now held by Jim Shooter, the same Jim Shooter who sold his first story to an important super-hero team title at the age of 13.

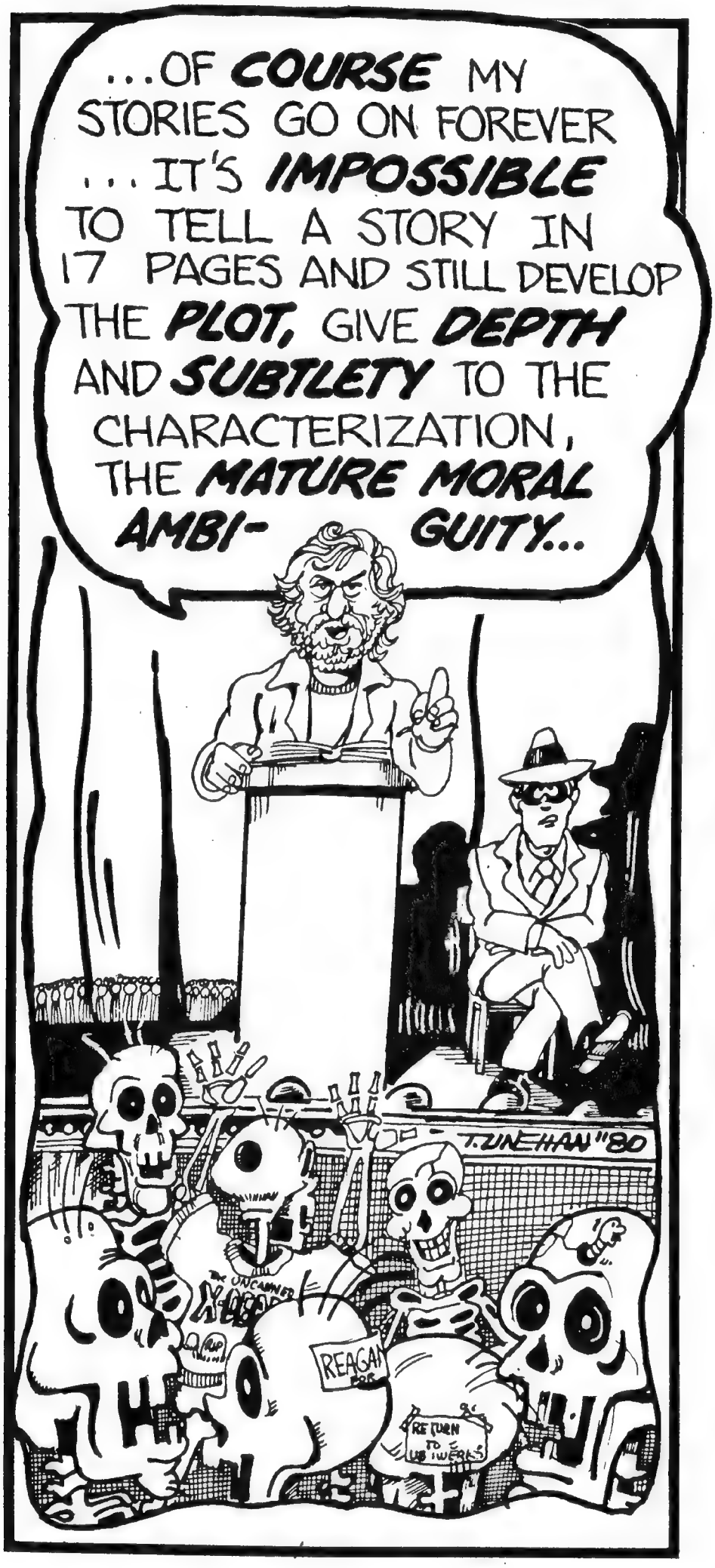
Indeed, in spite of the earlier tendency of Marvel to hire DC "graduates," the vast majority of Marvel's current staff has never worked at DC—and, of those who have, only David Michelinie and two newcomers,

Marc DeMatteis and Roger McKenzie, got their start on mystery titles. Shooter has also hired fanzine editors [Roger Stern and Mark Gruenwald, the latter bringing with him several contributors to his **OMNIVERSE** such as Peter Gillis, Ralph Macchio and Steven Grant], poeple from other areas of publishing [Lynn Graeme, Jim Salicrup, Rick Marschall] and others from a far wider background than just the mystery titles that provided so many of the current generation of writers and artists.

Many of these mystery graduates have looked somewhat askance at this policy of Shooter and his editors. Len Wein considered it unfortunate in a recent interview [in **THE COMICS JOURNAL #48**] that "People come in today and their very first assignment is **SPIDER-MAN**!" This opinion has been echoed by him, Marv Wolfman, and others of his generation in other interviews and at convention panels, and sometimes Shooter has seemed hard-pressed to defend it.


...SO THEN, THE AVENGERS, THE FANTASTIC FOUR, AND THE NEW X-MEN ALL CHASE DARKSEID--OR THANOS, WHICHEVER--OFF TO THE SKRULL GALAXY, WHERE EVERYTHING GOES ALL KOZMIC AND THEY ALL LEARN MYSTICAL TRUTHS IN THE MIDDLE OF A SLAM-BANG BATTLE...
OUT
IN
PLOT IDEAS
OKAY, I CAN GIVE YOU FIVE PAGES FOR IT...
BIG TIME COMIX
MARV WOLFMAN '80

Granted that the statement is slightly exaggerated [like Captain Marvel at Fawcett, Spider-Man is generally reserved for more experienced writers like Denny O'Neil], is there any reason a newcomer shouldn't write **SPIDER-MAN** if he can do a good job with him? After all, both Elliot Maggin and Shooter himself were writing Superman stories within their first few months at DC, and those stories compared quite favorably with many by more experienced writers. Although Marvel doesn't go quite as far as Wein and others have indicated, it **has** largely abandoned the hierarchical system, with the result that many important books are being given to newer people. And, at least in my opinion and that of much of fandom, many of these people are fully capable of the responsibility of writing these books—indeed, often more so than the experienced writers who preceded them. Mark Gruenwald and Ralph Macchio have turned **THOR** into a much more interesting book, at least in the opinion of many fans, than it was under Roy Thomas' interminable operatic adaptation, and **CAPTAIN AMERICA** is a classic case of a title that's far more well-written by Roger Stern than even three such illustrious writers as Jack Kirby, Roy Thomas, and Steve Gerber were able to make it in the past half decade.


...OF COURSE MY STORIES GO ON FOREVER ...IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL A STORY IN 17 PAGES AND STILL DEVELOP THE PLOT, GIVE DEPTH AND SUBTLETY TO THE CHARACTERIZATION, THE MATURE MORAL AMBI- GUITY...
T. DUNEHAN '80
REAGAN
RETURN TO USENET

There may be a certain psychological distaste for such non-hierarchical assignments among those who arose from that hierarchy—nobody likes to have the ladder of success turned on its side after he's reached the top. But they also have some legitimate worries about it—these inexperienced writers do have their faults, and Len Wein and Marv Wolfman **are** better, more polished professionals than any of them.

And yet polished professionals have their faults, too—and, though they may be fewer, they're often harder to recognize as such and tend to be repeated even by those who **do** see them, as we have seen in the case of Marty Pasko and his captions. They are also less likely to see those faults in others, which can lead to a writer such as Gerry Conway, who does have some definite ability in some areas, being praised as a superior writer even on those features to which his abilities apply very poorly. **THE NEW GODS**, an experimental series originally developed in detail by Jack Kirby, was a disastrous failure when Conway attempted to follow him, but Gerry's fellow mystery graduates and friends at DC continue to give him such inappropriate assignments. On the other hand, people who are new to the business—particularly those in an environment with others of widely varying backgrounds—are much more likely to realize what faults they have, and will realize them for what they are and endeavor to correct them.

As a result, Marvel is once again the more innovative of the two major comic book publishers—and, in the short run, the differences between it and DC in their hiring practices and the general background of their staffs may itself lead, as it did in the 1960s, to more original material from both. And in the long run, it is to be hoped, both companies will come to consider the wide divergence of material presented in comic books as a horizontal rather than a vertical divergence once more. ●

LOC NESS:

THE FUTURE X-MEN

© **1980 Peter Sanderson, Jr.**

It was not at all difficult to decide what the subject of my regular column for **LOC** was to be: it would consist of LoCs themselves, of course: reviews of various recent comics or cartoon-related material that have struck my interest for one reason or another. My letters of comment have been published in DC or Marvel letters pages since 1966, and, except for my college years, I have been writing LoCs ever since. As time passed, the number of my letters decreased, as I found fewer comics worth writing about, but the length of those letters increased, as I found more to say about those comics that did inspire me. Finally, by 1980, saddled with my writing and editing duties for **COMICS FEATURE, ARTFORM** and **OMNIVERSE**, not to mention the demands of my Real Career (the academic one), my LOC output came to a halt. The whole summer went by without my writing a single one. Besides, LoCs were beginning to seem irrelevant: my letters were getting so long that they rarely saw print, and then only in radically edited form; and since I was stopping by Marvel and DC so often on **COMICS FEATURE** missions, it seemed easier just to tell people in person what I thought of their latest stories.

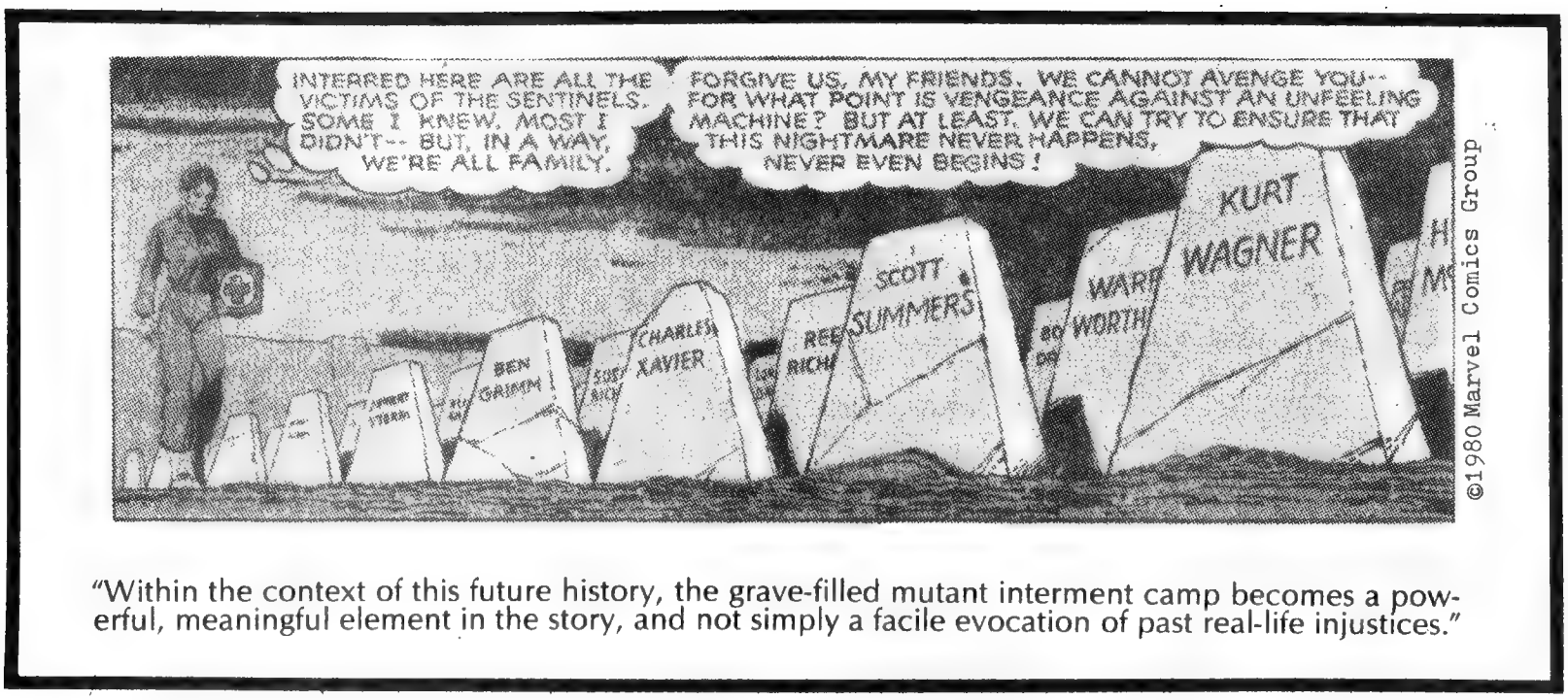
With the debut of **LOC**, however, I now have a means of getting my characteristically long and detailed commentaries into print, and so I have returned to the critical wars. My critiques of major new works in comics will usually appear in my regular **ENDNOTES** column in **COMICS FEATURE** (Reviews of **STEWART THE RAT** and **DETECTIVE #500** are scheduled for the near future) and here in **LOC** I will cover issues of regularly published comics that deserve special attention, major works whose critiques need more room than **ENDNOTES** affords, and anything else that strikes my fancy. I usually learn a good deal more about comics stories in the process of writing articles about them, and it is my hope that my observations will help widen my readers' understanding and appreciation of the stories as well.

As we are all aware, far too often continuing comic book series merely recycle old plots and characters that proved successful in past stories in the series again and again, and each time the process repeats itself the series' vitality diminishes further. A series should build upon and extend old concepts rather than simply running them through the cycle again. Ideally, the series should go further: it should introduce new concepts and thereby expand its own scope. My colleague Peter Gillis believes that **FANTASTIC FOUR**'s finest period lies between issues **#45** and **#67** because Lee and Kirby created so many brilliant concepts within that time, all of them entirely different from each other: the Inhumans and the Great Refuge, Galactus and the Silver Surfer, the Negative Zone, the Black Panther and Wakanda, Doctor Doom's ascension to godlike power (stolen temporarily from the Surfer), the Sentry and Ronan the Accuser of the Kree, and the Beehive and its ultimate creation, who was to become Warlock. Nothing since in super-hero comics has equalled this burst of conceptual creativity, and it would be foolish to expect to see such outpourings taking place all the time. But a period like this one should set a goal towards which to strive. A continuing series should attempt to surprise its readers as often as possible. The reader should not be confident he knows where the series is going, or what its limits are: ideally, he should expect the unexpected.

THE NEW X-MEN comes closer to achieving this goal than any other current super-hero series, and perhaps the clearest indication of its success in doing so is one of the final Byrne-Claremont collaborations, **"Days of Future Past"** in issue **#141**. Readers surely never expected a story to begin with the sight of 13-year old X-Man Kitty Pryde, grown into middle age, clambering through the ruins of Manhattan. Nor could they have foreseen that half the issue would be set in the year 2013 of an alternate future, in an America under the dictatorial control of the robotic Sentinels, where virtually all the Marvel super-heroes have been killed save for a small remnant of the X-Men which includes an adult Franklin Richards and their crippled mentor—Magneto. This series has set stories in an aristocratic Manhattan private club, an Irish castle, the moon, planets a galaxy away, an otherdimensional barbarian planet, a supernatural re-creation of Hell, the Canadian wilderness, a prehistoric hidden land, a tawdry small-time circus, and now a totalitarian future America. As long as this variety continues, one need not fear that this series will fall into a predictable rut.

This future North America is depicted in a concise, intriguing fashion. Take the horse-drawn bus on page

Peter Sanderson is a doctoral candidate in English at Columbia University and assistant editor of **OMNIVERSE.**


INTERRED HERE ARE ALL THE VICTIMS OF THE SENTINELS. SOME I KNEW, MOST I DIDN'T-- BUT, IN A WAY, WE'RE ALL FAMILY.
FORGIVE US, MY FRIENDS. WE CANNOT AVENGE YOU-- FOR WHAT POINT IS VENGEANCE AGAINST AN UNFEELING MACHINE? BUT AT LEAST, WE CAN TRY TO ENSURE THAT THIS NIGHTMARE NEVER HAPPENS, NEVER EVEN BEGINS!
BEN GRIMM
CHARLES XAVIER
SCOTT SUMMERS
KURT WAGNER
©1980 Marvel Comics Group

"Within the context of this future history, the grave-filled mutant interment camp becomes a powerful, meaningful element in the story, and not simply a facile evocation of past real-life injustices."

#5. We are not told why the bus must rely on literal horsepower, but the question leads to some interesting possible answers. Perhaps the Sentinels do not trust people to use fuel or motors, which they could use somehow against their robot masters. Perhaps the energy crisis has finally hit full force. Perhaps other countries, horrified by the Sentinels, have cut off all oil supplies to the United States. The ruins of Manhattan dramatize the ferocity of the battle Americans waged with the Sentinels before the latter took over. The battle itself is never mentioned: the ruins themselves tell us all we need to know. We **are** told that "millions have died" since passage of the "Mutant Control Act of 1988." Even if many of the dead were "normal" soldiers who battled the Sentinels, or innocents caught in the crossfire, the implication is that most of these victims were mutants. Thus it is established that the ever-growing population of mutants on Marvel-Earth amounts to considerably more than a mere handful of the planet's population. Senator Kelly's fears that a superrace is rapidly evolving are not without a factual basis. The division of humanity into three classes, according to their genetic makeup, each identifiable by insignia on the members' clothing, was a perceptive touch to put into the story, and indicates much about the Sentinels' rule. So do the collars they affix around mutants' necks as if they were dogs. Within the context of this future history, the grave-filled mutant interment camp becomes a powerful, meaningful element in the story, and not simply a facile evocation of past real-life injustices.

The sequence of events leading from 1980 to this alternate future of 2013 is adequately convincing, including its disguised counterpart to a Kennedy assassination, and the importance given to the 1984 election serves as an appropriate nod to Orwell. Care seems to have been taken in specifying which superheroes got killed. Presumably many more were killed than are shown to us, and one might guess that the Inhumans, Eternals, and Namor and the Atlanteans all decided that in this case discretion was indeed the better part of valor. These, after all, appear to be the nearly invincible Sentinels of old at work, and not the later, unreasonable facsimile pushover models. The question of Dr. Strange's and Thor's whereabouts are ducked. Thor would surely not let his friends' deaths pass unavenged, and if the Sentinels killed Thor, Odin would annihilate them. This is ultimately a minor point, however. The issue strains credibility in a more important way, I think, when it shows a Senate hearing taking place only three days before the 1980 election. Perhaps "presidential candidate" Senator Kelly, if he is still in the race, is doing some last-minute political grandstanding, but if so, it is odd that he waited so long to put the mutant issue before the public in this way, and odder still that he was able to induce his fellow committee members to return from campaigning to Washington on the eve of the election.

In the use of the "mutant issue" **THE NEW X-MEN #141** demonstrates how to build upon past series concepts. "Normal" humanity's fear and distrust of mutants has been an important element of the series in the past, but has nearly been forgotten in recent years. This story brings it back with a vengeance. Instead of the usual plot shtick of having the authorities misinterpret the X-Men's actions and put them on the wanted list, this time the underlying prejudices against mutants on Marvel-Earth are projected into a future society founded on repression of "mutantkind." Furthermore, an effort has been made to understand the basis for these fears. Instead of the usual mindless comic book mob or a ludicrous hysteric like Jonah Jameson, we are shown Senator Kelly, an intelligent and "decent man," motivated by fear rather than hate. He forcefully expresses the uncertainties of a populace that wonders if "there's any place for ordinary men and women" in a world rapidly filling with super-powered beings, many of them potentially quite dangerous. It was in the first Sentinels story that the "mutant issue" theme first became prominent in the series. This issue takes the Sentinels one step further as well. In-

stead of merely chasing and collecting mutants as they have done in their appearances up until now, this time they rebel against all humanity in their single-minded pursuit of their goal, and take over the whole continent. The Frankenstein motif that has always lain behind the Sentinels thus is dramatized more powerfully than ever before.

The skillful use of the possible future to illuminate the present should also be applauded. The fact that Kate Pryde and Peter Rasputin are married in this future, and indeed that Kate claims she fell in love with him at first sight, gives new meaning to the scenes between Kitty and Peter in 1980. Magneto's self-sacrificing nobility and paternal attitude towards the younger mutants in the possible 2013 should alert the reader that there is far more to the character than his usual threatening tirades indicate. [Magneto's melancholy soliloquies in **#113** and **#125** had already hinted at this.] We also see that Kitty has the potential for growing into a particularly strong-willed, determined woman. Seemingly offhandedly we are also told Magneto's real name, Magnus [and it is thereby suggested he is a Scandinavian], and we are shown what many of us had surely suspected: that super-powered beings do not necessarily age at the same rate as ordinary humans. In 2013 Storm looks decidedly older [or does her face simply reflect the cares of her hard life?] but not at all sixtyish. Magneto has apparently aged not at all.

Almost inevitably comics time travel stories suffer from tangled logic, and, unfortunately, this issue is no exception. The premise behind Kate's mission is incorrect according to Marvel's own rules on time travel, which were first clearly defined and dramatized in Byrne's own story in **MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE #50**, and have been reaffirmed since. In that story the Thing went back in time and gave his earlier self a serum which turned him back into a normal human permanently. On returning to the present, the time-travelling Thing found himself to be still a monster. What had happened was that the Thing's actions in the past had not altered his own history, which is indeed inalterable, but had instead created another time line on which a counterpart of himself was cured. One cannot change what has already taken place. Think of it this way. If someone travels into the past and murders your parents before you are born, does that mean that you will never have existed? Of course not. You are existing right now and have done so for years. How could your life never have happened? So, by Marvel's time travel rules, Kate cannot prevent the assassination of Kelly or the succeeding events from taking place on her own time line. What she can do is to guarantee that a timeline is created in which Kelly is not assassinated, and hence in which the Sentinels might not come to power. This means

"This issue takes the Sentinels one step further as well... this time they rebel against all humanity in their single-minded pursuit of their goal... The Frankenstein motif that has always lain behind the Sentinels thus is dramatized more powerfully than ever before."

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ALL UNITS, ALERT! PATROL 3L-40 HAS CONTACTED MUTANT ESCAPEES FROM SOUTH BRONX INTERNMENT FACILITY.
MUTANTS, YOU ARE ADVISED TO SURRENDER OR FACE IMMEDIATE TERMINATION. THIS IS YOUR ONLY WARNING.
F-FRANKLIN; HE... HE... OH, STORM, HELP ME! WHEN HE DIED, I FELT IT, IN MY MIND!
I KNOW, RACHEL, BUT YOU MUSTN'T YIELD TO YOUR PAIN, YOUR GRIEF. WE NEED YOU!

that the efforts of Storm, Wolverine, Colossus, and the psionic Rachel to invade Sentinel headquarters and prevent them from starting a nuclear war is more important than readers may at first think: if they fail, Kate's actions in 1980 cannot prevent the war from occurring either. It also gives Kate's mission an ironic tone: she thinks she can alter her own history, but cannot. If she realized her error but went ahead with the mission anyway, she would seem even nobler, for she would be fighting to create a safe future which she herself and the X-Men of her own timeline can never participate in.

The entire issue has a wonderful mythic resonance to it. It is a tale of an adult who becomes a child again, and returns to the secure, happy world of her youth, full of friends she has since lost, and (as we see in the pictures) filled with bright open spaces, in order to prevent the grim world of her adulthood from ever coming to be: a world of dark, confined places, filled with giant, unstoppable enemies, a world of ruin, decay, aging, and death. This is a fantasy with very dark implications indeed.

Obviously I want the action-adventure portion of a super-hero story to be as dramatic and exciting as possible, but what usually makes the difference to me between an ordinary super-hero comic and a good one is the skill it exhibits in characterization. The small touches can be as important as the big battles. The Stern-Byrne **CAPTAIN AMERICA** issues certainly handle the action-adventure elements superbly, but it is these small touches that interest me most in the book. The book consistently treats characterization in an appealingly quiet, understated manner that proves more affecting than the bad, empty, hackneyed melodramatics that other books use for supposed "human interest" scenes. With the last three issues published at this writing, **#251-3**, the Stern-Byrne **CAPTAIN AMERICA** has scored some notable successes both in providing us with good thriller plots and in convincing us that the players in these stories are more than comics cardboard figures.

Take the scene in **#253** in which Jacqueline, the former Spitfire of the Invaders, greets Cap only to realize suddenly that whereas once she was younger than he was, now she is physically far older. Later, the nonagenarian Lord Falsworth, once a super-hero himself and now desperately attempting to alert others to a menace only he perceives, fearfully asks Cap whether he is mistaken and is instead, without knowing it, slipping into senility. Senility is not a topic one often sees treated in comics, if ever, and surely not in this understanding fashion. Note Cap's quiet but firm defense of the sharpness of Falsworth's mind throughout the story.

There was equal sensitivity in the handling of the scene in **#251** in which the new potential romantic interest for Cap as Steve Rogers, "Bernie" Rosenthal, discovers a photograph of Rogers with his deceased girlfriend Sharon Carter. But amazingly enough, the book extends its understanding to the villains as well. It was entirely unexpected to find the unusual scene in **#252** in which Mr. Hyde gazes at the Manhattan skyline, quietly contemplating how hurt he had been by his "betrayal" by the Cobra, "a man I had trusted," and then eerily moving into a determination to destroy that betrayer even if it means destroying the whole city with him.

There are nice touches in the depiction of Batroc, who can easily seem ludicrous, as well. The best moment comes at the end of **#252**, when Batroc, smiling and shrugging, accepts his defeat. He is playing a game of wits with Captain America for high stakes, but it is still a game, and he admires and appreciates a success scored by an opponent as worthy and talented as Cap. What's more, Cap's smile seems to indicate that he has a not-so-sneaking appreciation of Batroc as well.

Rather than straining to find "patriotic" storylines (although they used a good one in issue **#250**), Stern and Byrne show us Cap's "Americanism" through emphasizing his personal virtues and idealistic values. There is a well-crafted scene at the beginning of **#253** which captures the essence of Captain Amer-

One of the Stern-Byrne thrillers, featuring Batroc and Mr. Hyde.

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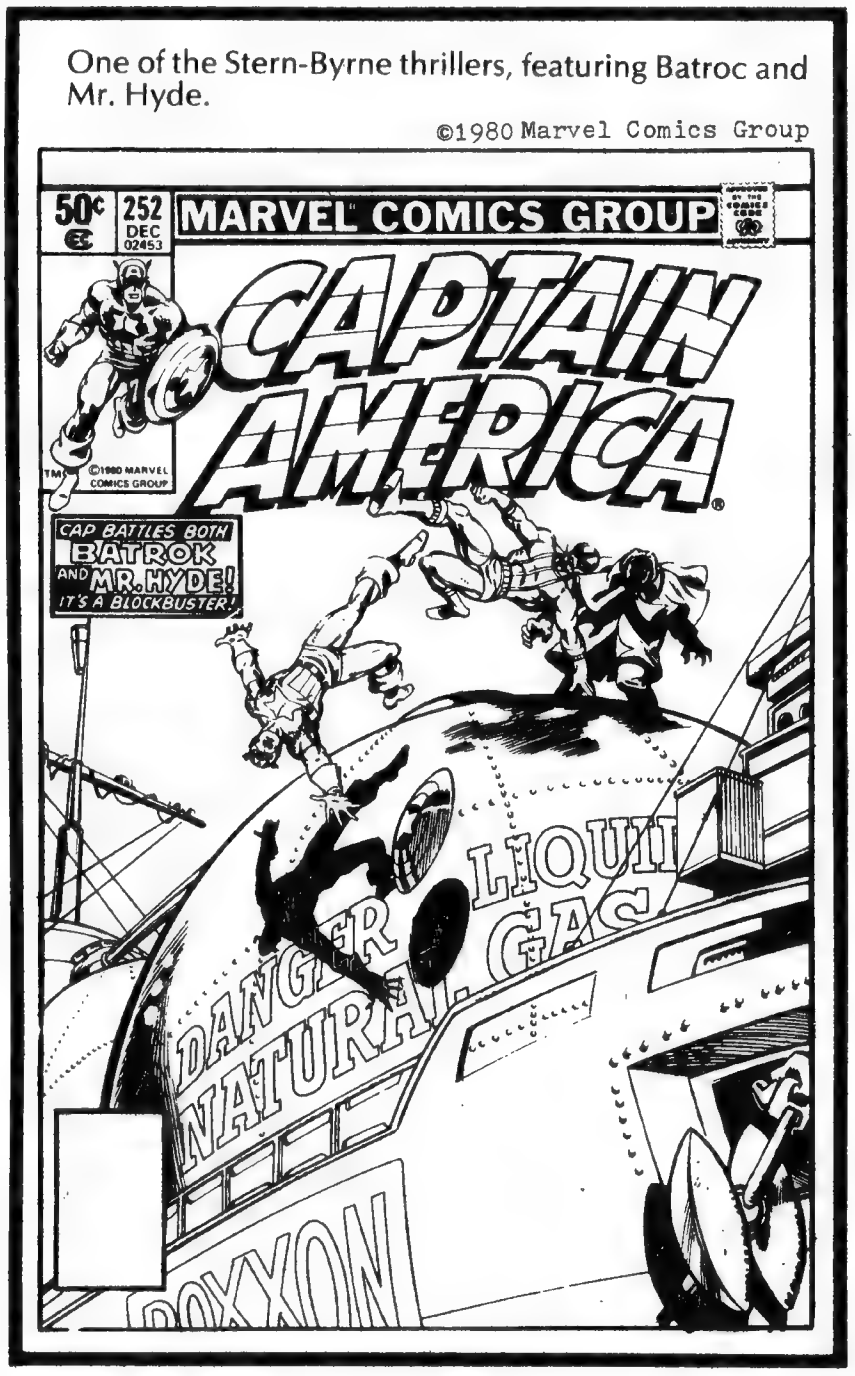
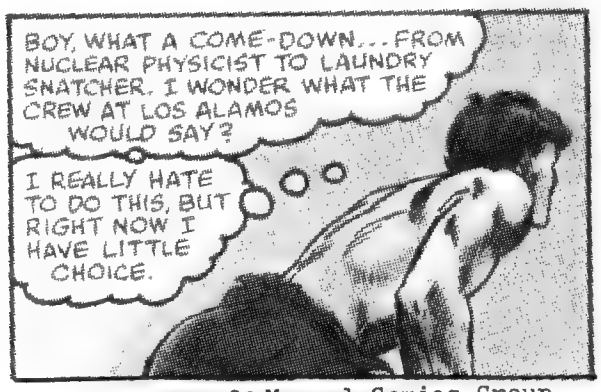


ica. A criminal is holding a gun on Cap, who stands only a few feet away, and yet he dares not fire. It's not like the similar situations we have seen with The Batman: the criminal is not too scared of the hero to shoot. In part, it is as Cap says: the criminal knows that, impossible as it might seem, Cap is indeed fast enough to keep from being hit by those bullets. But more importantly, I think, this scene conveys the force of Cap's will that comes from the strength of his commitment to fight injustice. It is in the face of that unshakeable determination to bring that criminal in that the gunman finally backs down and surrenders. It is this steadfast, unwavering idealism that ultimately distinguishes Captain America from Marvel's other heroes.

Jim Shooter's **HULK!** magazine story, **"A Very Personal Hell,"** has already come in for a good share of criticism. I can't comment on the sequences involving drugs, but I am told that there are many inaccuracies, and perhaps **LOC** readers might want to comment. As for the notorious scene of the attempted homosexual rape, the point is not that it is wrong to present members of any group as villains, but that it was surely a mistake to make the first Marvel characters explicitly identifiable as homosexuals a pair of rapists (lisping, yet). It is as if the first blacks ever to appear in a Marvel story were a pair of murderers munching watermelons. These are the elements of the story that have drawn the most attention, but there are other aspects of the story that deserve discussion as well.

The central plotline of the tale, after all, involves a woman who commits suicide when she loses custody of her child. This plotline shows the problems that occur when characterizations are insufficiently developed. Suicide is obviously the most drastic action one can take when life goes wrong; it is the ultimate act of despair. We are not told enough about this woman to convince us that she would indeed be driven to such an extreme act by the loss of her child. There is no indication that she is potentially unstable enough to resort to suicide. Without any such indications, her suicide can only appear to be an empty melodramatic device, however good the author's motivations might have been in writing the story.

"Both stories were trying to show the degradation of the life Banner is forced to lead."


BOY, WHAT A COME-DOWN... FROM NUCLEAR PHYSICIST TO LAUNDRY SNATCHER. I WONDER WHAT THE CREW AT LOS ALAMOS WOULD SAY?
I REALLY HATE TO DO THIS, BUT RIGHT NOW I HAVE LITTLE CHOICE.
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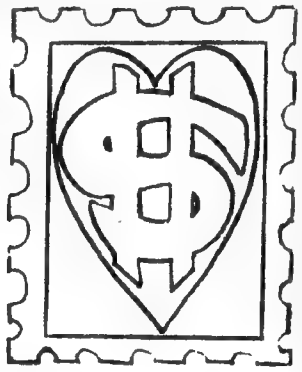
Shooter's and Stern's stories in **THE HULK! #23** both make an important point about Bruce Banner that has gone unnoticed because of the unfortunate impression the stories create that wherever Banner goes he is pursued by sex-starved gays and housewives. After all, what was Banner doing in that YMCA or in that woman's back yard anyway? Both stories were trying to show the degradation of the life Banner is forced to lead. The respectable, highly acclaimed nuclear scientist now must lead the life of a fugitive and a tramp, forced to steal books and his very clothes, and unable to stay anywhere but in the cheapest and most dangerous parts of the city. The Hulk feels lonely, homeless, friendless and alienated, but it is arguable that Banner feels these same emotions even more strongly.

This in turn raises another point. Banner **is** the Hulk, after all, and yet virtually every Hulk story treats them as two entirely separate beings. Hulk stories should show us that Banner and the Hulk share the same emotions: **both** long for love, security, companionship and peace, and both suffer from continual frustrations in achieving these goals. The difference is that while Banner, the repressed intellectual, is too inhibited to show his anger over his fate, the Hulk launches into berserker rages at his foes, real or imagined, at the slightest provocation. The Jekyll/Hyde motif loses its meaning unless we recognize that Hyde is the dark side of Jekyll, and expresses Jekyll's own hidden desires. The same is true of the relationship between Bruce Banner and the Hulk. Unless it is made clear that the Hulk expresses Banner's own basic emotions, both the innocently childlike ones and the darkly violent ones, Banner serves no purpose in the series and might as well turn into the Hulk one more time and never change back. ●

"YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LOVE" OR "WHEN IS A HOBBY NOT A HOBBY?"



by Don and Maggie Thompson

We've been in science-fiction fandom for years—since the 1950s. We met in 1957 at a picnic held by one science-fiction fan and writer for other science-fiction fans and writers. Maggie's mother had her first SF story [**"Divine Right"**] in the Summer 1950 issue of **THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION**, and Maggie grew up in a fannish household. Don's first magazine SF purchase was **F&SF** for November 1952.

You get the idea.

We weren't in on the start of science fiction fandom as it is known today. It began before either of us was born. But it has been with us for most of our lives.

Science-fiction fandom grew up around a love for fantastic ideas applied to a plot, for fiction unbridled by the "real" world. And a desire to discuss these ideas with others.

And fans liked to feel that their thoughts were also unbridled by the mundane world. Fans, it was said jokingly, had cosmic minds. Fans were slans. [A.E. van Vogt's SF novel, **SLAN**, told of mutants of incredible intelligence and ability who were persecuted by ordinary people]. Fans were Star-Begotten. [H.G. Well's book, **STAR-BEGOTTEN**, also told of mutants of abnormal intelligence.] "It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan," said fans, corrupting the last line of an SF story in which the word had been "man." "Fans are the race of tomorrow," said one fan club.

Obviously, fans weren't all **that** special. But they did feel a spirit of community [and sometimes of being a persecuted minority]. They developed their own slang, sayings, traditions, and celebrites.

And all of their activity centered around fanzines. Fanzines were amateur magazines reproduced by mimeograph, Ditto, or even carbon copies, circulated among friends and devoted to SF and fandom and, eventually, to anything under the sun—or beyond it. Fans were valued for what they had to say, rather than appearance or behavior or age or social status. Communications were **vital** to such a group, scattered all over the world with only the postal service to hold it together.

Only gradually did it become possible for these fans to make face-to-face contacts outside the large cities. And the contacts were made by **friends**, people who already knew each other from the printed [or mimeographed] page. Conventions meant a chance to **talk**, rather than write, to revel together in the rare opportunity to exchange ideas without having to wait for the mailman to deliver a response. A convention meant a weekend of celebration of common interests, to steep in a brew of shared enthusiasms [and sometimes other brews, as well].

Fans put on cons for other fans. The con committee would spend an entire weekend sweating profusely and running around like crazy and never getting sleep and maybe losing its collective shirt for the pleasure of being in charge of a weekend that would be written about at least until the next such event.

If any money was made, it was a fluke and, if there was enough to provide the committee with a good dinner each, that was a nice bonus, to compensate slightly for months of work. Celebrities [writers, editors, artists] would donate their abilities to panels, speeches, slide shows, and similar entertainments for their fellow fans and professionals.

And the dealers?

Well, they were the dirty hucksters—the money-grubbing hangers-on that fans tolerated for the convenience of being able to fill holes in a collection. Frequently relegated to hard-to-find corners of convention hotels, the dealers sold their wares to fans who

Don and Maggie Thompson are two of comic fandom's most accomplished critics. Both are professional writers whose work has appeared in major science fiction magazines, **THE BUYER'S GUIDE**, and innumerable other publications.

joked about how soulless the sellers were.

The dealers were a convenience, a minor part of the conventions, not by any means the center of things.

They were the benighted few who didn't feel the irrestible pull to attend the program. They could bear to sit behind a table filled with used magazines while the trufans [one of those slang words we referred to earlier] were thinking cosmic thoughts.

The dealers, too, were primarily fans. They were dealers in order to pay a small part of the expense of attending conventions [and maybe to justify the trip to their families]. But fannish doings came first, not dealing.

Why are we telling you this?

Because, after twenty years of comics fandom, we see this mighty difference between SF fandom and comics fandom: SF conventions grew out of love for science fiction. Comics conventions grew out of love for money.

The first comics con was a half-day-long affair in what was [to quote Dick Lupoff] "an overheated and underventilated hired hall just off 14th Street" in New York City in 1964. It was organized by a fan named Bernie Bubnis, who put it together almost by himself after previous plans by others fell through. It consisted of some talks by professional artists and writers, refreshments, and some fan-to-fan trading and selling.

The second comics con was a two-day event planned by John Benson. It, too, was held in New York City and was attended by vast numbers of Important People in the world of comics. And by us. We recall a panel consisting of Leonard Darvin and Don Thompson discussing the Comics Code—with Ted White standing in the audience and arguing with Darvin over the death of EC. Jack Kirby discussed his work, including the changes required when the Code came in. Chris Steinbrunner showed **FLASH GORDON**. And there were Klaus Nordling and Bill Harris and Dick Giordano and Gil Kane and Roy Thomas and Larry Ivie and Otto Binder and Paul Krassner and Dan Adkins and Dick Lupoff and Wally Wood and Bhob Stewart and Maurice Horn and Steve Stiles and Andy Porter and Terry Carr and a just-starting Jim Steranko and —and it was all **program**.

Kids sat in the corridors and traded comics. Ted White handled the auction of some items [probably to help support the event]. But we can recall no dealers' room—nor a huge take at the box office.

And the proverbial fine time was had by all.

It was put on by John Benson because he enjoyed

comics and their fans and wanted to provide a delightful experience for all attendees.

It was almost the last comics con of its kind.

Because putting on a convention is a lot of work, even if a committee is big and well-organized. And because the majority of comics fans were very young for most of comics fandom's existence—and **couldn't** run a con, if they wanted to. And because There Was Money To Be Made.

Especially because there was money to be made.

Suddenly, without most people realizing it, the fans were no longer the ones putting on most comics conventions. There were lots of conventions—and they were all over the country. There were conventions in colleges and conventions in malls and in convention centers and in hotels. And almost all had just a few things in common: They were run by dealers. They all had **lots** of dealers' tables. All the dealers' tables were increasingly expensive. And the purpose of each and every convention seemed to be the intake of large quantities of money for the people running it.

Some of the same pressures have been put on science-fiction collectors. At least one article has appeared **complaining** that SF pulps aren't commanding such high prices that individuals could never afford to collect them. There has been a price guide for old paperbacks and one for pulps, but paperback and pulp collectors seem to be trying to resist the pressure and are so far being fairly successful at it. [However, prices on really old pulps are now out of the range of the average fan.]

One reason SF fans can fight high-price pressure better than comics fans can is that an SF fan can usually find the story or novel he wants to read in more than one place—and maybe even find it with author's notes or other addenda when it is reprinted, rather than with a page or two chopped. If you want to read **" 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman,"** you don't **have** to have **GALAXY** for December 1965. You could find it [probably in a library] in one of the following books: Ellison's **PAINGOD AND OTHER DELUSIONS**, Wolheim and Carr's **WORLD'S BEST SF: 1966**, **NEBULA AWARD STORIES: 1965**, Ellison's **ALONE AGAINST TOMORROW**, Asimov's **HUGO WINNERS 2**, and Ellison's **ALL THE SOUNDS OF FEAR**. Or you can find a Steranko-illustrated version in **THE ILLUSTRATED HARLAN ELLISON**. Nor are these the **only** places **"Repent"** can be found; they're simply the ones we happen to have lying around.

The comics fan probably won't find any of what he's looking for in a local library. He's got to catch a story when it's published or scramble frantically around trying to locate it after it has gone off sale. And **that** puts him at the mercy of the back-issue dealer.

And, once again, the comics fan finds money at the root of his hobby, whereas the SF fan finds an increasing amount of bookstore space set aside for back "issues."

It's easy enough to say why things are happening.

It's not at all a simple matter to say how things could change. Our own children get so obsessed at times with the prices in Bob Overstreet's **COMIC BOOK PRICE GUIDE** that, when they see an old comic, the first question is not "Is it a good issue?" but "How much is it worth?" They don't care that we tell them over and over that what is listed in the **GUIDE** is not necessarily what a comic can be sold for—and is almost certainly not what a comic is **worth.** It does not matter that anyone can make a Xerox copy of a comic for less than $10 or that color Xerox copies are easier to make all the time. What counts is that some book, someplace, says that a mint copy of **TEEN TITANS #1** is worth $12. To somebody, somewhere.

We wish the bottom would fall out of the comics market. In times of recession, prices on collectibles like comics do tend to fall, especially when the bubbles have been inflated by speculators who buy **only** as an investment. When a number of people who have been hoarding **HOWARD THE DUCK #1** lose their jobs and need to find money to eat and put that comic on the market, they will discover that there are a limited number of people who want to **pay** $12 for a mint copy. And we'll be just delighted.

What? We'll be **glad** to see our "investment" lose its value? We'll be **happy** that our poor little collection will take on its **real** value?

You **bet** we will. We started reading comics because they cost 10¢ each and were a form of cheap [but good] entertainment. We'd like our kids to read them for the same reasons. And we'd like them to be able to enjoy some of the same stories we enjoyed —work by Walt Kelly and Carl Barks and John Stanley and C.C. Beck and Jack Cole and...

And maybe they, too, would read comics for love of the medium, rather than out of affection for money.

People should do things for love, not for the Big Buck.

[And if you don't tell that we're getting paid to write this, we won't tell, either.]●

SOME GOOD REASONS TO EVENTUALLY BURN YOUR COMIC COLLECTION

a column by Peter B. Gillis

The comic-book devil came to talk to me one day.

"You know, you really ought to admit to yourself that one day you're going to burn your collection," he said.

I laughed at him. "I'm 27 years old! I've done about all the growing up I feel like doing, and I haven't grown out of comics."

"Oh, I'm not talking about 'growing up'; you and I both know it's just the acquisition of a new set of neuroses. I'm talking about growing tired of comics, recognizing that comics' day is just about over."

"Anyway, I'd never burn them: not a **FANTASTIC FOUR #1**!"

"Oh, OK, then sell them to some poor unsuspecting dolt. It's the same thing. Look: 90%—"

"—of everything is crap. If I hear Sturgeon's Law quoted in one of these 'are comic books crap or art' things, I'm going to—"

Flames shot up around me. I shut up.

"This is not a 'comic books are crap' argument!" the devil rasped. "If it were, I'd let one of my flunkies, say some stupid newspaper reporter, come up with that tired saw. What I mean to conivnce you of is that 90% of the people who say they love comics, don't, and 90% of the reasons why you love comics are illegitimate, and you and they will eventually realize it."

"This I gotta hear."

"First of all, let's get rid of Sturgeon's Law: let's just talk about the really good comics. I realize that you have lots and lots of comics that even you admit are junk, that you just keep around for some anal reason or another..."

"A complete collection. I concede the point."

"...and getting you to admit that you'd get rid of all your **KID COLT OUTLAW**s or **SECRET SIX**s would be a pretty sorry triumph. I'll just talk about your **WARLOCK**s, Lee/Kirby **FANTASTIC FOUR**s, **SPIRIT** reprints, Steranko's books, **ZAP**s..."

Peter B. Gillis is a doctoral candidate in literature and a former teaching assistant at the University of Chicago. He is also a professional comics scripter whose work has appeared in Marvel Comics.

"...**BINKY BROWN MEETS THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY**..."

"Hey! My favorite too! That book makes me glad I'm not a Catholic!"

I stared at him for a second. Then he started to laugh, and in a voice that sounded suspiciously like Roger Stern, the Devil said, "But seriously folks... Most all of that stuff is stuff you like regardless of the fact that it's comics."

"Hunh? I don't get you."

"Remember when you were a little Marvelite? Remember how it galled you that Superman and Batman were on TV and none of your characters were? Remember when those godawful—you should pardon the expression—Gantray-Lawrence cartoons came out, how ecstatic you were, even though they were the worst of the worst?"

"It was general recognition of Marvel..."

"Could be, but I think not. What you were looking for was Marvel Comics taken a step **up**. This is my first point: People like Marvel and DC et cetera because they're cheap movies."

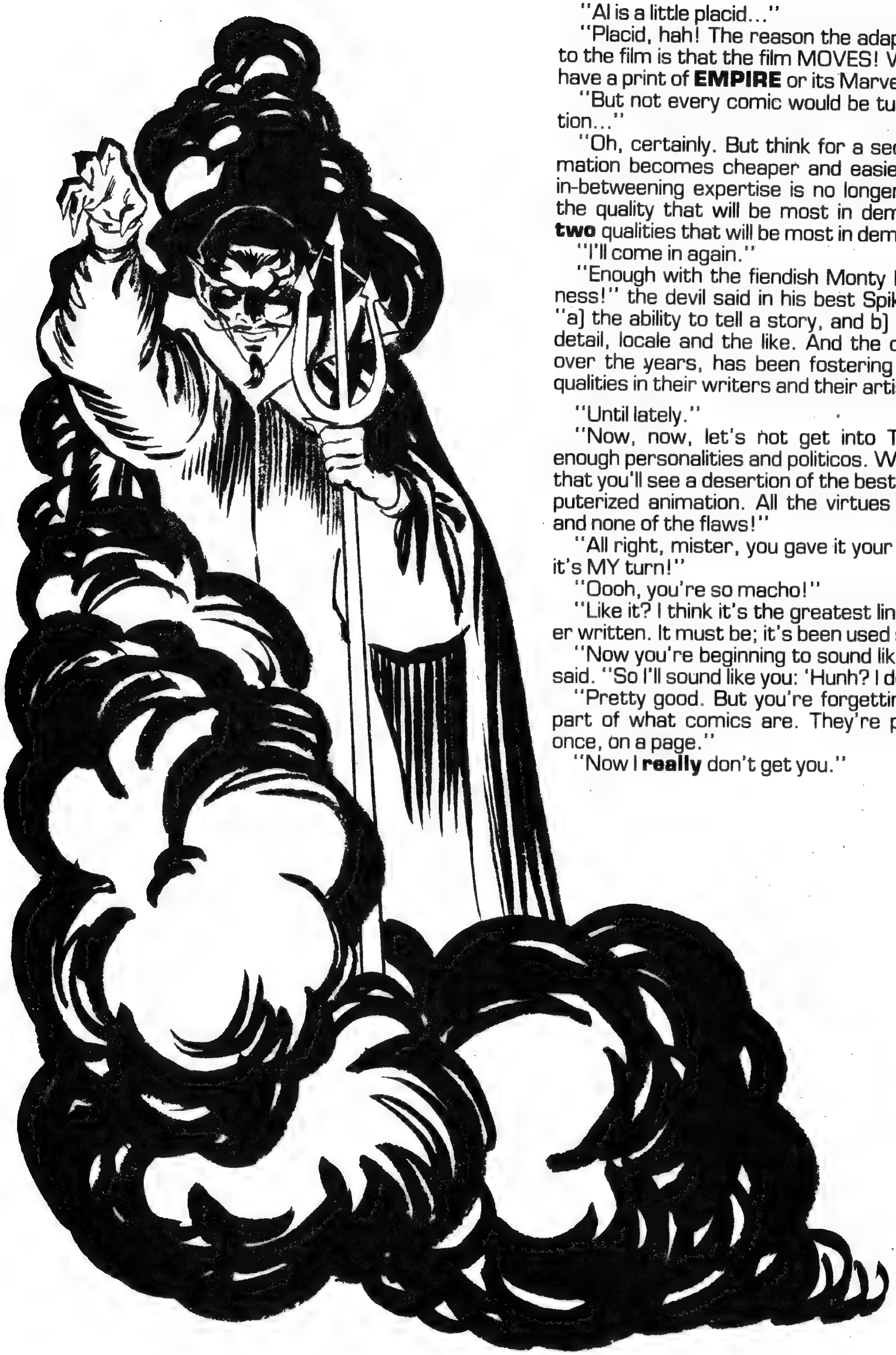
"So?"

"So!? [You're really playing the straight man for me, aren't you?] So, in a few years, computer animation will come into its own. Then you'll be able to have an artist like Jack Kirby or Mike Ploog or John Buscema draw or paint a picture of the beginning of an action, and the end of an action, and the computer, in full color, shading, the works, will animate all the in-between stuff. It'll make the old Disney look sick. Then you'll be able to have reasonably cheap, expertly done faithful transformation of comic-book into movie. And that's when you'll sell your collection, if anybody's left to buy them."

"Won't you? You're a fundamentally writer-oriented critic, Gillis. You prefer a well-written, poorly drawn comic to the other way around. So especially for you, if you can have the stories that so delight you done in a three dimensional, moving, talking form, why stay loyal to these paper-printed scraps?"

"Now, wait a minute..."

"Just take a look at **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**. Compare it with the Marvel adaptation. Archie Goodwin and Al Williamson can't get much better than that, eh?"



"Al is a little placid..."

"Placid, hah! The reason the adaptation is inferior to the film is that the film MOVES! Would you rather have a print of **EMPIRE** or its Marvel adaptation?"

"But not every comic would be turned into animation..."

"Oh, certainly. But think for a second. When animation becomes cheaper and easier, and technical in-betweening expertise is no longer at a premium, the quality that will be most in demand is a]... the **two** qualities that will be most in demand are..."

"I'll come in again."

"Enough with the fiendish Monty Python-type silliness!" the devil said in his best Spike Miligan voice. "a] the ability to tell a story, and b] inventiveness of detail, locale and the like. And the comics industry, over the years, has been fostering precisely those qualities in their writers and their artists."

"Until lately."

"Now, now, let's not get into THAT again. So enough personalities and politicos. What I'm saying is that you'll see a desertion of the best people for computerized animation. All the virtues of comic books and none of the flaws!"

"All right, mister, you gave it your best shot. Now it's MY turn!"

"Oooh, you're so macho!"

"Like it? I think it's the greatest line of dialogue ever written. It must be; it's been used so often."

"Now you're beginning to sound like me," the devil said. "So I'll sound like you: 'Hunh? I don't get you.' "

"Pretty good. But you're forgetting an important part of what comics are. They're put down, all at once, on a page."

"Now I **really** don't get you."

"If all your discussions had been about comic strips, I couldn't argue with you that much. But a comic book's unit of narration is the page. Although a lot goes on on a page, the reader still first sees it all at once. So there's a design element in the best of comics that is absent from straight real-time narrative like movies."

"You're quoting from your bachelor's thesis again, and it sounds like it."

"And you're evading the issue. Besides," I said, a little huffy, "it was a good thesis."

"Get on with it."

"Easiest example: you have a lot of ordinary pages of 6 or 8 panels, all nice and neat and orthogonal. THEN you get a full-page illo!"

"The camera pulls back..."

"It's not the same! A full-pager is not the same as a larger panel, or a camera pullback: all of a sudden, the one scene not only has an increased power, but it becomes a—how can I say it..."

"You can't," the devil said sourly. I was getting to him, I thought.

"It becomes the whole **field** of your perception. Something similar happens when a figure, a profile, or an object moves out of the panel sequence and becomes a design-element on the paper..."

"All right, all right! Enough of your damned—you should pardon the expression—technical terms. Gimme a fer instance!"

"For instance, when Starlin used a blue profile of Thanos to dominate a whole page of panels [you can check it out for yourself, it's **CAPTAIN MARVEL #29**, page 14]."

The devil walked over to my filing cabinets. "This wouldn't be another of your bizarre talking comic books, would it?"

"Ah, you **do** read my columns!"

"The devil pulled the book out of the file cabinet. "Hello!" it said.

"Shut up!" the devil shouted at it.

"Don't you dare set fire to it," I cautioned.

He found the page, and looked at it for a moment. "You see?" I said. "The profile, outside the panels, welds the whole page into a unit, showing the action —Rick Jones and the Controller—to be not only monitored, but dominated in many scenes by Thanos. So you have a multi-level phenomenon, all appreciable in one instant due to the design. Try **that** in a film!"

"Stifle yourself fer a second," the devil said. He was leafletting through the issue, poring over it intensely. Then he looked up at me. "How does this thing end? The story, I mean?"

"Because Thanos worshipped Death, Death could not worship him," the comic-book intoned.

"Hunh?"

I explained. "Thanos uses the Cosmic Cube to become God, see? And it's all because he loves Death—who is the figure in the hooded cloak, standing around. But Captain Marvel karate chops the Cosmic Cube, even after Thanos the God turns him into an old man—and that stops him."

The devil now looked cross-eyed. "Hanh??"

An idea dawned on me. Sensing an advantage, I pressed an attack. "And you don't see? Concepts which, in a real-time phenomenon like a movie, would go by too fast to be adequately followed, can be used in a comic where—since flow isn't everything to a comic—it can be thought about, digested and comprehended. In a novel, of course, there can be even more abstruse concepts and fine distinctions than in a comic, but that is the price you pay for doing something visually."

"But what you're talking about is a difference in degree. You've got the commercial American film on the brain: strange and abstruse concepts—a karate chop?—can be done on film—they just become harder to comprehend. Look at **2001**. Or, in another direction, look at **LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD**, by Alain Resnais. Look at Fellini, for Christ's sakes—you should pardon the expression."

"But it's an advantage..."

"Only if you're talking commerciality, boyo. Too many people talk as if commercial movies and comics defined the finctions of the art forms. They don't. You may prefer them, and some of them are the best—Hitchcock, Eisner, John Huston, Jack Kirby—

"The profile, outside the panels, welds the whole page into a unit...

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MEANWHILE, IN A SECRET NEW YORK LABORATORY...
WELCOME BACK TO THE WORLD OF THE LIVING! I AM YOUR POST THE CONTROLLER!
AND, AT STATELY AVENGERS MANSION...
CAP, WHERE ARE YOU?
WOW! INTERESTING! CAPTAIN MARVEL HAS BEEN SEPARATED FROM HIS HOST BARN RICK JONES!
I'M OVERJOYED TO SEE MY MALFUNCTIONED SLAVE DISC DID YOU NO PERMANENT PHYSICAL DAMAGE, BECAUSE NOW...
MAR-VELL, YOU'VE DONE IT NOW! YOU'VE GONE AND GOT ME BURIED UNDER TWO STORIES OF STEEL AND CEMENT!
WHAT'S WORSE, THE AIR'S BURNING OUT!
...I MUST GIVE YOU A NEW ONE!
YOU BETTER GET HERE QUICK, SILVERTOP...
...OR THERE AIN'T GOING TO BE NO MORE RICK JONES!
EVEN THE COSMIC CUBE CAN'T SEEM TO LOCATE HIM! WHERE IN THE COSMOS CAN HE BE?

but you can't forget the Jean-Luc Godards and the Victor Moscosos and the Nicholas Roegs and the Art Spieglemans..." he trailed off suddenly. I had him.

"See! See! There is an experimentation possible **within** the form. The underground guys—like Rick Griffin and Robert Williams, old bizarros like Bernie Kriegstein and George Herriman, took a page of narrative in pictures and played with it in characteristicaly comic-book ways. [And I think I can describe a Sunday comics page, when talking about Herriman's **KRAZY KAT** or Frank King's **GASOLINE ALLEY** as a bridge between the comic strip and the comic book.]"

"OK, you got me sidetracked: outside of Brian DePalma, you know how I hate commercial movies. And I'll admit that it is possible to play with the comic-book medium, it's also possible to make a case for the formal principles and unique potentials of painting on two-ply radial tires. Or the distinctive musical timbre of playing the slide whistle. Trivial."

"I think we're teetering into the 'are comics art?' morass again. Look: your arguments are the same posed by the critics who said that photography would kill painting."

"Well, didn't it?"

"Oh, brother!"

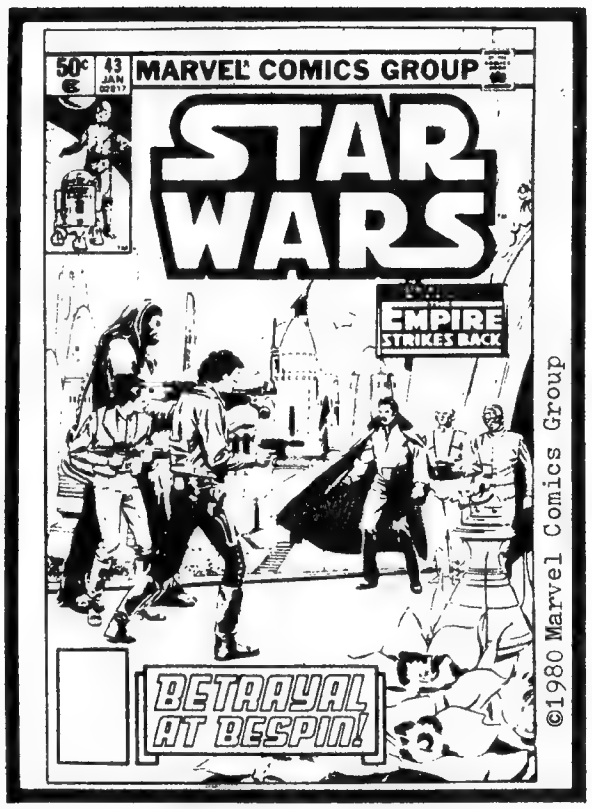
"No, wait! I'm not saying the Picasso and Mondrian and Chagall are crap—Mondrian maybe—but look at where art has gone, I mean serious art, so-called! From being a vital part of cultured life in previous centuries, it's now appreciated as an esoteric discipline —Art Appreciation is a course you have to take in collitch, and 90 % of the populace stares at 20th century art the same way they stare at African Sculpture—as an alien, alienated culture! Where is the art that is a part of everybody's life?"

"Comics," I intoned. He turned red, and I laughed.

"Touche. In the past, I've answered my own question with 'advertising,' especially when I taught at Oberlin. But comics are an 'artistic,' that is, for-its-own-sake incarnation of commercial art, or political cartooning, which is the same thing, you know."

"But that's also beside the point," the devil went on. "All that 'visual rhythm' stuff is fine and good for artsy-fartsy types like you—and me, **mea culpa**. I even might be persuaded to acknowledge that you might be in that exalted 10% of true comic-book lovers, similar to the exalted 10% that loves Vera Hruba Ralston movies and Lin Carter pastiches. But my point is that the main virtue of comics as they appear today—and the main reason they're loved—is because, **temporarily**, they're the repository of a lot of good fantastic adventure. When it moves on, and it will—**STAR WARS** was the first shot in that revolution—so will the enthusiasm, and you'll be left with an arid, academic field."

There was a brief pause as the orchestra died down. I adjusted my barrister's robes and powdered wig. "I beg to differ, milud," I said. [The devil was fond of jazzing up a debate.] "My point about comics being the heir to traditional painting and illustration was not



so off the mark as you might think. The fact that comics don't move and don't have sound shouldn't be simply written off as a flaw. There is, almost always has been, one medium that moved and had sound and action and all that sort of stuff." I paused. The devil tapped his foot in impatience, then gave up.

"Which is?" he said exasperatedly.

"The drama. Lots of action, vividness, all the things that you say are lacking in comics. Did the drama ever drive the novel, or before that, the epic tomance out of business?"

"No. The restrictions of the stage..."

"Oh come off it! The drama even has an edge over the film: it's three dimensional, it's got true sound, not just from remote speakers. You can even smell things up there. Don't hand me stuff about restrictions! No matter what, it was more vivid than a column of words! And yet the poem, the novel thrived! And you know why?"

"No, why?"

"Because there's a difference between a real-time art-form and a non-real-time art-form! The fact that a drama or a movie or a computerized cartoon goes by before your eyes at its own pace, and the **reader** moves a novel or a comic book along makes it a fundamentally different thing! Look," I shouted, and went to the rear of the courtroom and picked up a copy of **WITHIN A BUDDING GROVE** by Marcel Proust, flipped some pages, and began to read from it:

> " 'I listened to her'—that's Berma, the famous actress playing in Racine's **PHEDRE**—"I added, more to irritate the devil than anything else, " '...as though I were reading **PHEDRE**, or as though Phaedra herself' blah blah blah—unnecesary stuff here.' I could have wished so as to be able to explore them fully, so as to attempt to discover what it was in them that was beautiful, to arrest, to immobilise for a time before my senses every intonation of the artists voice, every expression of her features;' more elaboration which I'll skip —'But how short their duration was! Scarcely had a sound been received by my ear than it was replaced there by an-

other.' Get that? And so on: '...and the picture that I should have liked to study existed no longer.' "

I put down the book. "You see? '...then it was replaced by another!' "

The devil scowled. "That's a hell of a way to quote Proust, chopping him up like that."

"Space considerations, milud," I replied.

"And besides, in a film, you can repeat the experience."

"That's not the point! Sure, you can see the film again, but it remains a real-time phenomenon. What I was pointing out is that in the film, or drama, the impressions get replaced **by an external force**: the thing goes on without you. The most extreme case of that being that if you fall asleep, you miss it. But nonetheless the flow is **imposed**. Not so in a novel, or a comic. **You** are the one who governs the input, the flow, the pace."

"We will control the horizontal—we will control the vertical," the devil muttered to himself.

"Hunh?"

"Just quoting **THE OUTER LIMITS**, my boy." The devil smiled. "You have a point. But—hand me that book, would you?"

I handed it to him. He held it on an outstretched palm, pointed—and wham! the book fell open to the page he wanted.

"You lucky devil."

"Thank you. Now—as you know, later, the narrator buys a picture of that selfsame Berma. So:

"The innumerable admiration which that artist excited gave an air almost of poverty to this one face that she had to respond with, unalterable and precarious as are the garments of people who have not a change,' this face on which she must continually expose to view only the tiny dimple on her upper lip, the arch of her eyebrows, a few other physical peculiarities always the same, which, when it came to that, were at the mercy of a burn or a blow."

"What does "have not a 'change' mean?" I asked.

"It means a change of clothes, clotpoll," the devil said. "Now do you admit that the devil can quote scripture for his own purposes?"

"OK. So in certain things, like characterization, the comics medium—**any** static plastic medium—will have a difficulty. Other devices must be brought into play when you can't show the subtle processes of facial expression. Or bodily movement for that matter: Grace and dynamism are hard to evoke when you've got static pictures. But look at Jack Kirby; look at Craig Russell. They've found alternative ways that are just as good, if not better."

"The fact remains the comics are **impoverished**, as Proust said."

"Proust never said anything about comics!"

"Acknowledged. But the difference is between an automobile and a bicycle. In one, it's done for you, in the other, you do it. Now who, except for perverse exercise fiends—you should pardon the expression—would choose the bicycle?"

"The difference is not between a car and a bike. It's between a car and walking. **That's** what I'm trying to say. It may be difficult to walk through a novel or a comic, rather than drive through a movie, but try driving through Yosemite National Park, and then walk, and see which you'd prefer!"

"All right, all right. But where does all this theoretical hooroar get us, other than a fine theoretical distinction that only collitch types will appreciate—or give two hoots in Hell..."

"...you should pardon the expression..." I added wryly.

"...thank you... about?"

I mulled that one over for a minute. "Well, it all boils down to—basically—you know—well, take a look at Kirby or Ditko. Take Ditko. His nether dimensions would not be improved if they moved, or if they were fleshed out: they aren't three-dimensional, they're four or five dimensional, because Ditko played with drawing the way that M.C. Escher did. It evokes something that even a **faithful** translation into cartoons couldn't do. We reconstruct something crazy out of them ourselves, and so believe it. If it were done for us, we might not. Or take the cover of the old **KIRBY UNLEASHED** portfolio. You've got a guy wearing an Asgardian-type helmet with horns five feet across! And it works, because of Jack's style. But if somebody **really** wore that—even a cartoon character that moved—you'd laugh your head off! Hell, even animating some of Odin's costumes that Jack did would make them look garish and cluttered, whereas on the comic book page, they're incredible."

"So people are more indulgent when they read comic books."

"No, no, no! The thing is, comics, fantasy illustration, SF illustration—they all do their depiction with a specific style that is peculiar..."

"I'll say it is!"

"SHUT UP—particularly suited to a static medium. It's called 'leaving things to your imagination,' as much-abused as that phrase is. The idea is that comics work because they **imply** so much. Kirby's starscapes:what cartoon could ever give that same feeling? Even one of his? Because we can't peek around into the corners of Kirby's or Ditko's universes makes the imagining and guessing all that more exciting! And take a look at Kay Nielsen's fantasy illustration, or Edmond Dulac's; or Alphonse Mucha's; Craig Russell's (who I think is going to be in the same class with them one day)—the **style** of their illustrated worlds implies more and more and more wonders, that, if they moved, would never be the same. Look at some Japanese prints: karst mountains rising in the mist; what clot would animate them?"

"Hmmm. Hmmm. I can see—Hmmm." The devil knotted his brow. "OK. Truce. At least for now. You haven't convinced me, mind you, but I can see I'll get no farther this time."

"Good. How about joining me in a Campari and soda? It's very good."

But he was gone. ●

THE RAPE OF MS. MARVEL

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by Carol Strickland

Am I just overly sensitive, or what? I know that I have a tendency to shoot my mouth off about the role of women in comics, but shouldn't everyone be concerned when a comic displays a struttingly macho, misogynist storyline that shreds the female image apart with a smirk—and rewards the one who did the shredding? I should think that such a story would create an uproar in fandom—but where is there even a whisper of discontent?

I realize that females are only a small part of comics readers and fandom, but it should not just be the women who raise the roof over such a story. It should be everyone. Isn't everyone entitled to respect as a human being? Shouldn't they be against something that so self-consciously seeks to destroy that respect and degrade women in general by destroying the symbol of womankind?

Could it be that the great masses of fandom actually approved of a travesty like **AVENGERS #**200: **"The Child Is Father To..."?**

In that issue, an all-male Marvel staff, presided by Jim Shooter and watched by the Comics Code, slaughtered Marvel's symbol of modern women, Ms. Marvel. They presented her as a victim of rape who enjoyed the process, and even wound up swooning over her rapist and joining him of her "free" will. Such a storyline might have fit into the 1950s, when people actually believed such a thing was possible—I mean, they thought that women invited and enjoyed rape back then—but to present such a storyline today shows a collection of medieval minds at work. Or at vicious play. For such a storyline to pass through the echelons of editor, editor-in-chief, and Comics Code can only be a crime.

For those not familiar with Ms. Marvel, or only familiar with her from her unsatisfying stint with the Avengers, let me explain who she is relative to circumstance and character:

Most people know, if they don't truly understand, that women have been stomped on by the comics industry ever since there were comics. From the snivelling Lois Lane of **ACTION #**1 right up through today's so-called "liberated" heroines (you can tell who they are by their low-cut or see-through costumes and stolen dialogue from the outdated **FEMININE MYSTIQUE**), the male-dominated comics industry has gone out of its way to preserve the macho male and weak (or vicious) female image, ensuring the small percentage of females in their reading audience.

You'd think that in the comics of the 1980s there

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Carol Strickland is a long-time comics fan and is the publisher of **HOLA!**, a fanzine which covers comics book heroines.

would be zillions of characters who were themselves first, women second, and adventurers always. But look closer; where are they? Wonder Woman is a preaching man-hater with a memory that has more holes in it than her lover has lives, if that's possible. She is a symbol of modern womanhood, supposedly, and that makes her an interesting character. Now think—name a male comics character who is a symbol of manhood: there is none! That's because a male comics writer realizes that a symbol cannot be of real interest to a reader. But because women are all aliens from another planet, it's all right to make them symbols, especially if they are misshapen cliches drawn from maligners of the women's movement, the people who designate females who want to be themselves as "bra-burners," an archaic and never-correct term.

Black Canary is less than a shadow of her man, the ultra-macho Green Arrow. The Invisible "Girl" whimpers and complains from the nearest corner while her menfolk do the fighting. The Wasp dreams of new costumes and new hunks to pester. Supergirl cries over a broken date.

These are the stalwarts of comicdom females. The truly liberated women, those Tigras and Elasti-Girls and Black Widows, are resigned to limbo or just prolonged neglect. As of this moment in the comics industry, only Chris Claremont is portraying a modern woman—and he manages to do it with every one of them entrusted to his care. People may not agree with all that he is doing, but they must agree that he is lightyears beyond the other writers [even Jo Duffy, who is next in line to him], and that is a very sad picture of comics. This is the Nineteen-Eighties, folks. But who would believe it, to look at the state of comics?

Back in '72 Marvel had created a trio of books designed to hook the female audience: the insipid **NIGHT NURSE**, the violent and poorly-written **SHANNA THE SHE-DEVIL**, and the interesting **CLAWS OF THE CAT**, written by Linda Fite and drawn [in its first issue] by Marie Severin and Wally Wood. The Cat was a fascinating character, even if she was a bit heavy-handed in places. But like many a TV series, the book was given only a few shots to make it. **CAT #4** was the last issue. The concept was later reincarnated as the vapid Hellcat, whose costume-derived powers were never explained. The original Cat's powers came from scientific treatment and training, but the Hellcat merely put on her emblemless costume to be super. I suppose women can't really be expected to train at anything, but must rely on chance to give them the skills they need to make it in the real world.

In 1974 the Cat was revamped in a different fashion; she was mutated into a horror-genre Cat creature named Tigra. When given a solo shot in **MARVEL CHILLERS** a year later, she surprised everyone by becoming a stylish, snappy-pattered heroine whose future could have been bright. But she was bogged down in a five-issue continued story, and if anything will lose a reader's interest faster than a multiple-issue tryout story, I don't know what it is. Tigra and the Cat-People have been forgotten by Marvel except in two team-up stories since then. Surely such a sparkling, weird hero should be popular in today's menagerie of sought-after non-humans like the X-Men, Hulk, et al.

1976. Marvel decided to try to cash in on the "liberation craze" yet again with a new spin-off from the popular Captain Marvel to be called Ms. Marvel. She would, like the Cat, be a symbol of the liberated woman. They plastered the words "This Female Fights Back!" on the cover and bared a lovely blonde woman's navel—thus began Ms. Marvel. For the same number of beginning issues, both the Cat and Tigra had Ms. M beat hands down. But for some reason Ms. Marvel stuck with it. There was a shuffle of writers; Chris Claremont admits that he didn't give Ms. Marvel his entire attention at first. Thus it was that Marvel's own origin remained a jumbled mess until almost her twentieth issue.

Once Mr. Claremont settled into his job, though, Ms. Marvel began to do things. Things few, if any, women characters [or men, for that matter!] had done before. While her first adventures had been composed of the obligatory fight scenes upon more fight scenes, now her stories began to have plots; now her life as a hero was being tied into her life as a civilian. By the time Carol covered her navel in a Cockrumized costume, the comic had hit new

Marvel's "liberated" heroines: Tigra, Linda Carter, The Cat and Shanna.

heights of interest in plotline and artwork. Notice I didn't add "for a heroine" there. That's because Chris Claremont and Dave Cockrum were both looking at Ms. Marvel as a person—a beautiful, female person, yes, but a super-hero above all! There is only one drawback to this duo of issues: that existing artwork was changed from showing Carol Danvers [Ms. Marvel's alter-ego] in a sensible desert-exploring wear to having her in a midriff-exposing blouse. The Word was to make her more sexy, attract more male readers not so they'd get hooked on Ms. Marvel's electric characterization, but so the comic could become a Code-approved girlie mag.

Ms. Marvel was mature, powerful, intense and sure of herself.

And two issues later she was cancelled. Now she started to pal around with the Avengers as a fighting companion, and later, as a replacement for the Scarle Witch. Under the writing of Jim Shooter, Ms. Marvel suddenly developed a pushy, intimidating quirk to her nature. Mr. Shooter, whose portrayal of females has not changed one iota since his writing as a fourteen-year-old in the mid-1960s, has a Gerry Conway-ish quality to his work. No, no, Mr. Conway is not the only or worst writer to do this; he is simply the most **consistent**, when it comes to portraying any female who does not cower in the corner or behind her man when things get rough, to categorize **her** as 1] pushy—and usually hypocritical, 2] oversexed, and/or 3] a castrating man-hater. Ms. Marvel was granted the character trait of oversexed pushiness as she proclaimed Wonder Man a "hunk" and that she'd really like to get to know him better—heh, heh.

With Shooter giving up the writer's role in order to edit **THE AVENGERS**, David Michelinie stepped in and Ms. Marvel became one of the super-gang; a normal super-hero, although one to stop action with an "important" message about liberation. Many writers do this for some reason. I suppose they don't realize that example has always been a better teacher than preaching. Most comics females today do a lot of preaching. This is why most female characters today are uninteresting and frail.

With a landmark issue coming, big number 200, staff wondered: what to do for the occasion? It was decided that Ms. Marvel would have a baby. Michelinie said that it would be the Supreme Intelligence's kid, since the Supremor has always wanted a Kree-Terran hybrid. This would naturally lead to an intriguing adventure, a climax to the years of scheming through countless comics for the Supremor; and a probable end to the Supremor himself, once Ms. Marvel beat him up for what he did to her—and her child.

Ah—but Jim Shooter said no! **WHAT IF #20: "What If the Avengers Fought the Kree-Skull War Without Rick Jones?"** had ended its tale with the imaginary/parallel world Supremor merging his intelligence with the inert form of Mr. Jones to become himself his precious hybrid. Jim Shooter, editor-in-chief of the Marvel Multiverse, proclaimed that the story would be too much alike and too soon after the **WHAT IF?** story. He didn't bother to look at the many times in which the Supremor's plans have infiltrated a half-dozen titles within as many months in years past, with no complaint from readers.

Instead Mr. Shooter came up with a wonderful plan of his own for Ms. Marvel's anticipated Happy Event. He would make magic number 200 a landmark in bad taste. He would portray a rape that would be applauded and rewarded by all who had news of it.

To my way of thinking, this shows questionable judgment on Mr. Shooter's part.

But let the finished product help you decide. For those of you who either missed it or chose to forget it as quickly as possible, the plot went something like this:

Ms. Marvel is three days pregnant at the start of the issue, and is about to give birth to a full-term baby. For some reason, the Avengers do not call in an obstetrician, but leave their most powerful member in the unspecialized hands of mentor Tony Stark's good buddy, Dr. Don Blake. I suppose Blake won't bill them the way an obstetrician would.

In a male-fairytale version of birth, Ms. Marvel delivers in a non-birthing sort of way [I don't understand it either. Let's look at the physical processes involved—!] There is no pain, no labor, no logic... All the while Ms. Marvel is exposed to the other Avengers without shred number one of privacy during the non-birth birth.

Varying scenes show us that the story is well-written. It is merely the plot that is the blot of blots on this work. The Wasp, not knowing that the baby's father is unknown even to Ms. Marvel, congratulates her on the delivery and baby. We see its mother: exhausted, humiliated: "I've been used!" she snarls.

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Marcus' story. At no point does he evidence any regret over his ill-usage.

"That isn't my baby!" Later she refers to it as "that **thing**." There is no trace of maternal instinct that any other conventional heroine would have been oozing, even at such an inauspicious time. It is a scene well done. Yet compare the concept of this, the rejecting, angry, raped mother with the final image of Ms. Marvel. The change is heinous. It and the plotline spoil everything in their wake.

The story goes on: the child, a boy who names himself Marcus, develops at an ever-increasing rate, passing quickly through childhood to become a young adult. He explains his origin, starting with his real father, a man Ms. Marvel never coupled with: Immortus.

The mere use of such a character is controvertible in itself, for in well-known previous **AVENGERS** plotlines, Immortus killed Kang, his earlier self. Mark Gruenwald has explained that the Immortus who killed Kang was clearly a parallel Immortus, for if Kang were killed, there would be no Immortus around to kill him. Yet Marcus [and an editorial note] clearly remembers his father as **the** Immortus who killed off his earlier self.

I'll pass the Bayer as I continue...

Anyway, before this Immortus-who-could-not-have-existed popped into existence, he had become anxious for a "mate." Not a lover, not a wife, just a

BUT EVEN CAROL DANVERS HERSELF DOESN'T KNOW THAT AND SO SHE STEELS HERSELF, BRACING FOR A RESURGENCE OF THE LOATHING AND HUMILIATION SHE HAD FELT BEFORE, WAITING FOR THE SWELL OF FEAR AND ANGER SHE KNOWS WILL FOLLOW...

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Ms. M. in her right mind. "There's no trace of the maternal instinct that any other conventional heroine would have been oozing..."

"mate" from good old Terra. Knowing that mortals can't exist in his home of Limbo, he created a sort-of semi-Limbo, rescued a victim of a Terran sea disaster—a woman who could be Carol Danvers' twin—and, in Marcus' words, "through a combination of gratitude and the subtle manipulation of my father's ingenious machines, the woman fell in love with him." Subtle manipulations. Equals brainwashing. Equals brain control. Immortus couldn't get this unnamed woman into bed with him, so he changed her personality and took her against her will. Equals rape.

It seems mortals can't spend too much time in semi-Limbo, although Marcus has been there all his life. His unnamed mother vanished when he was a boy to go to her death in the real world. Marcus was left with only his father, a wonderful role model, being a rapist and such.

Daddy vanished [when he killed himself off a few millenia before], and Marcus was left alone. Not particularly liking semi-Limbo, he decided to go to Earth. He concocted a scheme by which he could be unnaturally born on Earth, speeded up in growth, and thus be able to prevent the destruction his presence in normal space would eventually create. He coldly chose the mother of the thing that would be himself: "the powerful combination of Kree and human strengths, would be the perfect vessel," he decided, and chose the perfect double of the only human woman he had ever known and loved: his unnamed mother. Of course, his old-fashioned father and mother taught him you can't reach a woman on a level as a human being; he couldn't explain his plight and let her decide if she wanted to go through with his crazy idea or not; he wouldn't even consider that she might have a better idea for getting him to Earth. Instead he went about wooing her: poetry, clothes and music he furnished, thinking that those are the only things women are interested in. When Ms. Marvel

didn't respond, as he explains to her in the present, "...Finally, after relative weeks of such efforts—and admittedly, with a subtle boost from Immortus' machines—you became mine."

This is not hidden between the lines. Little kids can read the obvious fact: he raped Ms. Marvel. The artwork goes to great lengths—two close-up panels—to show Ms. Marvel's ecstacy during the pseudo-mating.

Ah ha. Another lesson to be learned from comics. It is okay to rape. Women enjoy rape.

Immediately after implanting himself in some sort of pseudo-scientific fashion into Ms. Marvel's womb, machinery teleported her to her jet, seconds after the time she had been abducted by Marcus. The machinery also wiped out her recent memory—better to leave these females ignorant, right? Marcus couldn't care less about the feelings of a woman who suddenly found herself pregnant—and giving birth—for no apparent reason.

This is not Marcus' fault. He is ignorant of human feelings, being brought up by the equally unfeeling Immortus.

The explanation of Ms. Marvel's rape is made to Carol, Thor, Iron Man and Hawkeye. It is obvious that Immortus' machines have renewed their effect upon Ms. Marvel. Remember the angry rape victim at the beginning of the story? Now with a glisten right in her eye and a sob in her heart, she tenderly strokes the rapist's cheek and tells him that she will return with him to his home. She even adopts his Oedipal way of speaking. Of all the times Marcus refers to her directly, it is as "Carol" three times, "my love" once, and "Mother" three times. From Marcus being "that **thing**," he is now "my 'child'"to Carol. And she's going home to play a different kind of house with him. Aren't the kids eating this up?!

One should think that the other Avengers who have heard this story and see Ms. Marvel's sudden reversal in attitude toward Marcus would stop her from going back, knock some sense into her... anything. But look at this carefully-chosen audience: Hawkeye—Marvel's answer to the neanderthal Green Arrow, a psychological sickie (catch his last act with Death Bird). He probably gets a kick out of Ms. Marvel's Getting Her Due. Iron Man—a.k.a. "playboy" Tony Stark. In keeping with his public image, Tony chooses to avoid the implications of this event. And Thor—if anyone can match Jim Shooter's medieval thinking, it is he.

The story ends with Ms. Marvel and Marcus teleporting to semi-Limbo. Iron Man begins to have second thoughts: "We've just got to believe that everything worked out for the best," he temporizes. He isn't convinced, but he won't make a scene.

Mr. Macho, Hawkeye, turns sloppy John Wayne sentimental: "That's all we can do," he says. "believe... and hope that Ms. Marvel lives happily ever after." It is a fitting end to this male fantasy. A desirable woman/mother figure is raped and then chooses to be the lover of her rapist/son. Raping is manly. Women love to be raped. Perversion is wonderful for kids and other people of taste to read.

The story would be almost laughable if it weren't written in such earnest. Someone really believes this tripe, maybe. Or someone just wants to have some fun.

May I ask a stupid question? Where is the Comics Code during all this? There's their stamp on the cover, covering the "S" in AVENGERS—but where are **they**? This dirty joke that someone at Marvel dreamed up is all out in the open—not a bit of it is between the lines to be hidden from the innocents who make up such a large proportion of the audience. And the entire plot is a deadly insult to every woman.

The bottom line to **AVENGERS #200** is blatant irresponsibility, with every nuance of immaturity that that word provides. "Misogynist" is also a very applicable word. But instead of either, we'll probably see the words "collector's item: rape issue" next to the number 200 in the **AVENGERS** column in next year's **PRICE GUIDE**, with an inflated price to match it.

If it takes a second round of witch hunts to rid four-color standard comics of trash like this—count me in!●

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WRITING AND ART IN COMICS — FRIENDS OR FOES?

by Bob Soron

Five seconds: Which is more important in comics —the story or the art?

If you answered with one or the other, you're wrong. The correct answer is "It depends." That's if you want to talk about specific examples. If you're looking for generalities, it's easy: neither.

People love to say that art is more important. You look at the art. The art tells the story. And who shells out $150 for a page of an **X-MEN** script?

The trouble is that, too often, the art **doesn't** tell the story. And, for some reason, the artists who don't tell a story well are the ones comic fans usually idolize.

Why? It's a long story...

I confess, I have not always considered writing and art to be equally important. Originally, I felt that the writing was more important. Even now, I lean in that direction: after all, just as the writer's job is essentially to embellish a basic plot, the artist's primary function is to tell the story. That doesn't mean they can't have their own styles—but, if there's no story, it isn't a comic, it is a portfolio.

[It's at this time that I admit, somewhat abashedly, that I've never seen a study on exactly how people read comics. So, I must go by personal experience and hope I'm not a mutant.]

When I read a comic, the process entails: Read caption. Look at art. Read dialogue. Go to next panel; repeat process. In other words, the order is text-art-text.

Good captions, then, will provide the continuity between the last bit of dialogue and the next bit of art. Good art will bridge the gap between captions and dialogue. Good dialogue will tell the story by letting me know what the characters are thinking and saying—how they're reacting. It provides me with whatever nuances the writer wanted me to get, and the artist didn't or couldn't put in. Essentially, each step is vital to the comprehension of the next (ideally).

Bob Soron is a graduate of Emerson College, a member of Interlac and CAPA-alpha, and a former assistant editor of **THE COMICS JOURNAL.**

[Now, of course, this is one definition of good, and I don't want to get tied up in semantics. In some cases, for instance, "good" writing may have to explain what's going on in a bad art job—a bad story-telling job—and so the writer may have no room for nuances.]

The difference between these steps is that the writing—captions and dialogue—is assimilated **consciously**. I **read** the words. The art, however, is a visceral assimilation. The artist **conveys** to me what he or she wants. With reading the words, then, I am active; with looking at the pictures, the artist is active.

Now, both writers and artists have styles. Writers' styles are apparent in plot structure and word choice. Plot structure is dictated to a degree by the company [or editor, for the company]: Green Lantern's oath must be recited by the sixth page, the secret identity must be shown in the first three pages, subplots must be set up, etc. Word choice, however, is primarily the province of the writer. Given the same plot, Gardner Fox and Paul Levitz would not write the same **JUSTICE SOCIETY** story.

Artists' styles break down into parallel categories: composition and rendering. The artist has somewhat more freedom than the writer: given a format [plot], there are many ways to interpret it visually. So long as the artist doesn't confuse the reader, he or she is pretty safe. The rendering adds to it; that's where the subtleties come in, just as word choice allows the writer his or her subtleties.

Now, given these styles, both writers and artists settle into what are essentially routines. They know pretty much what they'll be doing and when they'll be doing it. And, of course, the writers and artists come up with sub-routines, so to speak—pet words or techniques. They'll use these because they're accessible to both the creators and the readers. After a creator has been around awhile, he or she develops more and more of these.

Since we're concentrating on these words consciously, we can recognize them easily; they become cliches. Since the art's effect is not conscious—and since there is always some variance in the composition and in the rendering—it's harder for us to find them, and when we do, they don't become cliches:

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DEAFINING ROAR
GEE, WHAT FUN. GOIN AROUND IN SPACE KILLING DEFENSELESS FIRE HYDRANTS! THIS THE LIFE!
DITTO
YOUR LOVELINESS IS ONLY MATCHED BY YOUR SICK MIND
O, LOVE, YOUR SWEDISH IS DEE-VINE. KISS ME, NOW!
ARRGH!
OH. BOY. LUNCH! I SURE HOPE THAT THERE'S REUSH THIS TIME
T. LINEHAN '90
X-MEN

the familiarity helps us rather than hinders us. An understanding of composition is not inherent in our minds; it is learned, and it is through familiarity that we learn it.

These techniques of the artists, then—these pseudo-cliches—are simply conventions of the medium. It's only when we get an artist who uses the same conventions over and over—Mike Grell and Kurt Schaffenberger come immediately to mind—that we start to consider them to be cliches.

--TOO LATE!!
HUNH? I MUST BE HEARING THINGS. I THOUGHT I--
WHOA?
A SKRULL! HERE?!?
©1980 Marvel Comics Group
JEANIE, I KNOW YOU'RE ALIVE. SO WAKE UP-- PLEASE. JEAN, WAKE--!!
--UP?
SCOTT?

Byrne/Sinnott and Byrne/Austin. Note Sinnott's more economical lines and choice brushwork. Austin's embellishing is almost entirely penpoint and minimizes spot blacks. They each started with the same raw materials, though.

In one sentence, then, the difference between comics writing and comics drawing is that the former must avoid cliches; the latter must use them, without abusing them, for it's only when these conventions are abused that we consider them cliches.

One of the paradoxes of story-telling—which, remember, is what comics are all about—is that it's good only if we don't notice it. If we notice it, then it's interfered with the telling of the story. Thus, when most people discuss comic **art**, they discuss **rendering**. These people are overly concerned simply with the obvious style, and not with the less obvious composition, because the composition is not noticed. One can return and study it, but the first time it is sub-conscious.

Now, with writers, both categories—plot structure and word choice—are conscious. The plot is less obvious, because it can be changed slightly to fit one character, again for another character, and so on. But the parallel between art and story remains. A comprehension of the plot is crucial to our understanding of the words. [How often have you read a comic, not fully understanding the plot, and started to wonder what's going on?] But the words are not crucial to our understanding of the plot: the art, if necessary, can carry the reader.

And, just as the rendering embellishes the composition, the word choice embellishes the plot. So, when most people talk about comic writing, they talk about word choice. A "badly-written" comic is one with many cliches in the captions and dialogue. People are more conscious of the plot than of its counterpart, composition, but generally do not concern themselves with the elements of the plot. While it's not uncommon to discuss the styles of Don McGregor, Len Wein, and others, people rarely discuss fundamental differences in plotting and methods of story-telling.

This is because comics are a story-telling medium, and the telling of the story is both verbal and visual. Thus, most people tend to **accept** the plot; the critic's question becomes, "How well was the plot executed?" Word choice is the most common element discussed. If the word choice was good, the story was good; if the word choice was bad, the story was bad. The reader accepts the plot as created by the writer and interpreted by the artist; it's the more obvious stylistic differences which, by and large, are discussed.

The artists have the advantage; they know that a reader has to go through a conscious process to understand the plot. But, if the reader can understand the story through the writing alone—because the average reader does not consider the artist's story-telling as a factor—the artists can be lax: "If the reader isn't going to bother with the composition, why should I?" The reader, however, **is** going to **look** at the art— and so the artist can frequently get away with flashy rendering. The easiest way to cover the fact that the story isn't told well is to distract the reader from the story. That way, these artists get noticed—and the good story-tellers don't.

Again, the situation parallels that of the writers. Since the function of a comic is tell a story, the writer's primary responsibility is to create and develop a

plot. But it is the writers who are considered "wordsmiths" who are noticed, whether they use words well or not.

This is a direct result of fandom. All of a sudden, some years ago, pros became aware that adults read comics, too, and decided to try to appeal to them. These pros went for the pretentious, equating it with "literary." Unfortunately, they forgot that it was the "childish" comics—those quotes are important—that appealed to the adults in the first place. Luckily for these writers, though, there are enough people who feel guilty about reading comics after they turn 14 that they hook onto these "literary" writers, using it as an excuse: "Oh, but the characterization of The Human Fruitfly is so well thought out, and so consistent from issue to issue—except when it grows!" and "Chuck Farley doesn't write comic books—he writes **poetry**" have both been overheard [with appropriate real names] in past years.

At this point, the rift can't be breached. That's not entirely bad, though: diversity can only help a medium, and there has been both good and bad in both "literary" and "childish" comics. Most fans, for whatever reason, don't want to recognize this—they cling to their preferred style and discuss that to exclusion, rarely even bothering to pick up a comic done in the other style. If they do—particularly those who prefer the "literary" comics—they will consider it slumming, perhaps lowering their artificially high standards to enjoy it. This is unfair: both types of books should be judged by the same criteria, criteria which take into account not the number of lines on a page or words in a caption, but rather the way the story is told both by writer and by artist.

And so, that is why the writing in comics cannot be ignored. There are too many people reading comics who are impressed with all the wrong people—but **not just artists**. It's inherent in the medium that the people who do best what they are supposed to do will be ignored by the casual reader—most of fandom—and by critics who are trying to rationalize their indulging in what is considered a childish pastime by those unfamiliar with the medium. There'll always be people who argue that the "literary" people are doing it right, and those who say that the "childish" creators are doing it right. Both groups are wrong, though. There's good and bad in each category. It's recognizing and defining the good and the bad that must be worked on. ●

COMING IN LOC #2

MURRAY WARD takes us on the road with THE NEW X-MEN's creative team. Travel with him as he discovers why "MY HEROES DON'T DO THAT!"

MARGARET O'CONNELL joins LOC as she responds to "Sleaze and the Married Super-Hero" from COMICS FEATURE #6.

EXTRA!

Join in the fun as LOC's very own rambunctious letter column, "Signed, Sealed, And Delivered" begins. Don't miss the start of our forum for comics discussion.

Plus more columns and reviews on comics, Animation, the Golden Age, and comic strips.

"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"
by Kurt Busiek

Scenario: Peter Parker is walking home one day, mind buzzing over his latest sub-plots, when he notices that some unspeakable villains are whaling the tar out of his apartment, threatening his poor feeble Aunt May, and doing anything else imaginable to get Petey riled up. He darts for the nearest convenient dark alleyway to change into Spider-Man, but before he can get there, he is surrounded by a field of fluctuating energy, and in the blink of an eye is transformed into (ta da!) **CAPTAIN UNIVERSE**!

—————————[?]—————————

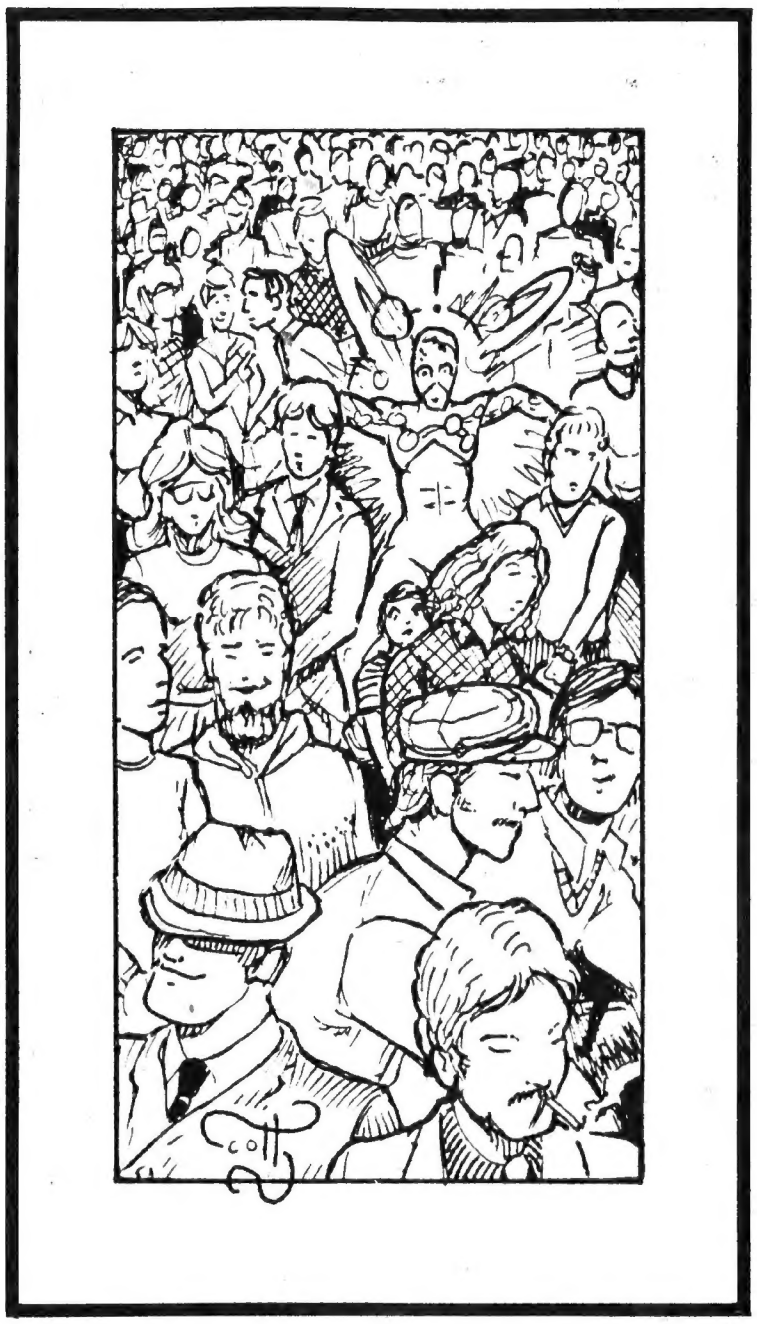
It could happen. Or maybe Aunt May could become a super-hero. Or anyone. Even **you**, the typical reader, could become an incarnation of Marvel's latest super-hero (though it isn't likely unless you know the writer). That's one of the strange things about this new character (if you can call him/her/it that). Another strange thing is that Captain Universe violates most of the standard principles that back up the average super-hero. His powers change every issue. There is no supporting cast—and thus no continuity. But while it would be Captain America's deathknell if he began to treat his series like this, it is Captain Universe's strength. It is precisely these facts that make Captain Universe one of the most interesting concepts to come along in professional comics in years.

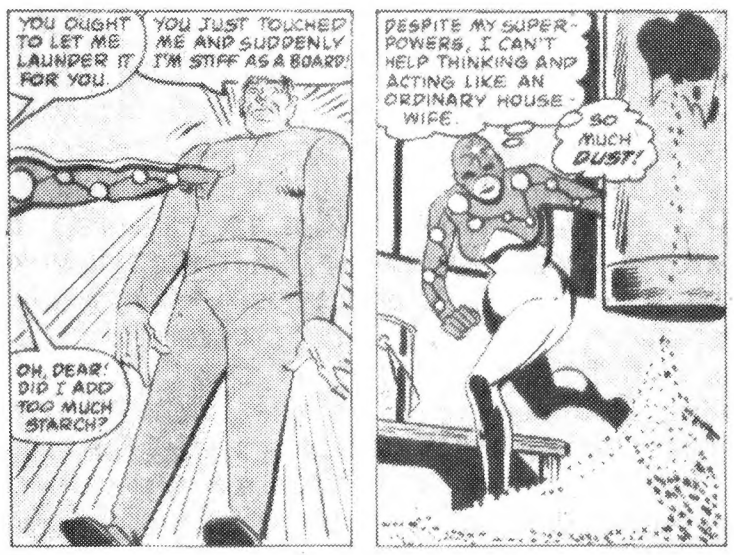
When the character first appeared, he wasn't incredibly different from the rest of Marvel's super-powered line. He popped up in **MICRONAUTS #8**, as an ex-astronaut given powers by the Enigma Force (a near-omnipotent force for good in the Microverse, concerned with destroying the evil empire enslaving this sub-atomic reality) in order to save Earth from Baron Karza (the ruler of this empire). As such, he was heavily involved with Mantlo's Mego toy book—in fact, Captain Microverse might have been a better name for him. But though his powers and mission might have been microverse-derived, his personality was linked to Earth. He considered himself a symbol of humanity, an "embodiment of all that's best." He pontificated on what makes human beings wonderful as he fought Baron Karza, until Karza, battered by the Enigma Force and sickened by Universe's aphorisms, skedaddled for home. This was the end of Ray Coffin's career as Captain Universe, which, except for its brevity, was very similar to that of other heroes: unknown force gives normal human super powers. Human uses powers to back up personal ideals. The character was fun, but nothing new.

With **MARVEL SPOTLIGHT #9**, however, things changed with Captain Universe. His entire concept was rerouted. The strong links to the Microverse were seen as a problem; the idea of a super-hero defending this Earth with powers derived from a completely different universe (which would require occassional explanation—and the Microverse is rather complex) is a little odd, and it's possible that if **THE MICRONAUTS** ever runs into licensing trouble with Mego, it might cause problems for Captain Universe. Whatever, the Enigma Force was disposed of, and replaced with the Unipower. The Unipower is an invisible, intangible force that spreads throughout the universe (much like "the Force" in **STAR WARS**). It is a force for good, drawing much of its definition from Ray Coffin's ideals expressed in **MICRONAUTS #8**. Humanity (and possibly all sentient life—this is a **universal** force) has an essentially noble core (which is nice to know) and the Unipower is simply that core come to life, and taking an active hand in the world. At time of crisis, the Unipower ex-

presses itself through the auspices of Captain Universe, i.e. a person or persons is imbued with superpowers and snappy costume, and has the opportunity to help his/her fellow man by fighting the evil that the Unipower is worried about. It is to humanity's credit that every Captain Universe so far has chosen to fight for good.

The Unipower is near infinite, but the usual problems with "cosmic heroes" are neatly sidestepped. The powers of Captain Universe vary from hero to hero. Ray Coffin, the first and most powerful Captain, had powers like those of the Silver Surfer or Thor, but when his son Steve became the second incarnation, **his** powers were more finicky—matter transmutation, life support, etc. And the Dodgson sisters, Clare and Ann, had to worry about bullets. This is because the individual human picked to become Captain Universe knows nothing of the omnipotent nature of the Unipower, and their power is expressed through their personality—the things they think they can do, rather than some specific list of powers usable by any Captain Universe. Ray Coffin's very direct personality dictated his powers—he said he could stand up to Karza, and he did. He met bludgeoning force with bludgeoning force, and it's interesting to note that he is the only Captain Universe who didn't win his battle. He stalemated Karza, but it was the Micronauts who drew him back into the Microverse. Steve Coffin won his battle against Mister E, although his power didn't equal his opponent's. It's possible that Steve, as a teenager, felt himself inferior to an adult, and thus couldn't conjure up the power to directly oppose Mister E. He also drew his powers from the popular kids media, making himself a Star Wars lightsaber, a skateboard, and kung fu movie nunchakas. It was, after all, the stuff of his




YOU OUGHT TO LET ME LAUNDER IT FOR YOU.
YOU JUST TOUCHED ME AND SUDDENLY I'M STIFF AS A BOARD!
OH, DEAR! DID I ADD TOO MUCH STARCH?
DESPITE MY SUPER-POWERS, I CAN'T HELP THINKING AND ACTING LIKE AN ORDINARY HOUSE-WIFE.
SO MUCH DUST!

"Her continual reference to herself as 'just a housewife'... led her to fight using aerosol cans, floor wax, vacuum cleaners, and so forth."

fantasies, and the Unipower simply fulfilled those fantasies by making him into the super-hero he's always dreamed of being. Clare Dodgson, limited by her experience as a private detective, found her powers expressed in much the same way as she had always fought [but better] plus she got flight and Univision [which seem to be standard for everyone]. Her sister Ann had very curious powers, befitting her very curious personality. Her continual reference to herself as "just a housewife" [she must be addicted to daytime TV commercials] led her to fight using aerosol cans, floor wax, vacuum cleaners and so forth. [Though the idea of a super-powered housewife is fertile ground for a wild character, Ann's stereotyping brings out one of the other strengths of the Captain Universe concept—badly conceived characters are gone by the next issue]. This power variation, aside from assuring us that the super-hero will be suited to the task at hand—not too powerful or too weak—makes it possible for Captain Universe to fight Galactus one issue and be fighting street hoods in the next.

The writer of the series runs into certain problems one doesn't find with any other super-hero, there being no continuity except in name and costume. We

have no idea who Captain Universe will be with each issue, and so the writer cannot fall back on the typical mainstays of the super-hero series—powers and personality. He can't present a familiar personality in an already dramatic scenario, because we are **not** familiar with the personality. He has to start from scratch with each issue [unless he does something like I did for the first paragraph of this article, and that would begin to wear on the reader almost immediately]. Another typical plot gambit is to trap the hero on the splash page in some quandary we know [or think] he cannot get out of—but since we don't know anything about the hero, that can't be done either. The only way to capture the reader's interest is with a good **story**.

Thus, Captain Universe is plot-oriented, rather than series-oriented. The "continuing adventures of ..." angle is eliminated, and the writer is forced to work harder to come up with an acceptable issue. This isn't so much a problem for the concept as a boon for the reader; it requires the writing to be better than usual. A badly-produced issue, though, will not hurt the book, or cause repercussions that create drastic plot problems in later issues. If mistakes are made, they disappear naturally.

The two Captain Universe stories so far [not counting the **MICRONAUTS** adventure] have been good examples of the sort of thing the book is capable of, in terms of diversity and interest. The first was a special effects/science fiction adventure story, while the second was a crime drama. Both featured excellent artwork by Steve Ditko, and energetic [if erratic] scripting by Bill Mantlo. In keeping with the unusual concept, though, each demanded more than an ordinary super-hero story might deliver with the same premise.

In **"The Mystery of Mister E,"** Captain Universe's power provided an aid in defeating the shadowy evil being determined to plunge Earth into eternal darkness, ruling it through his shadowy legions. But the factor which is the key to victory was Steve Coffin's human ingenuity. He could not confront the villains directly [he kept trying and failing] but when he took an indirect approach, he could win. And at the end of the story, while we might have considered it merely a "job well done" for someone like Green Lantern, since it came from Steve Coffin [who was up until then a normal American kid] we felt his nobility and looked upon his acts as a more significant accomplishment.

"Double Jeopardy" gave us a more down-to-earth story, in which twin Captain Universes faced and defeated a masked crimelord. Those two heroines, though, were definitely superior to their antagonists. They had no real trouble mopping up the criminal element. Neither does Spider-Man, but in a story of this sort it is the very fact that he is Spider-Man, with two-hundred-odd issues of history behind him that carries the story. This time we need more than the straight adventure, so Mantlo and Ditko gave us a twist ending, and brought in an element of humanism to the plot—Captain Universe might be able to handle the dramatic end of things, but it fell on the shoulders of normal human beings to live out life with all its burdens. This message capped off the issue neatly, making it an effective short story as well as a colorful comic book.

The possibilities of a Captain Universe series should be obvious to all. Any kind of story is possible, with any setting, any characters. A feminist might be Captain Universe in one issue, a pacifist could take over with the next... literally **anyone** could face a crisis that requires the aid of the Unipower. Each of them could be stirring heroes, and each Captain Universe would be linked to the roots of heroism in comics—humanity. It is the people who are in danger who extricate themselves, their own innate heroism coming out in time of need, aided by a force affirming that they **are** worthwhile beings, deserving the power by dint of their being capable of using it. The ultimate essence of Captain Universe is a hopeful, optimistic view of our world and an assertion that morality is viable, and that's a kind of heroism comics can use more of.

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